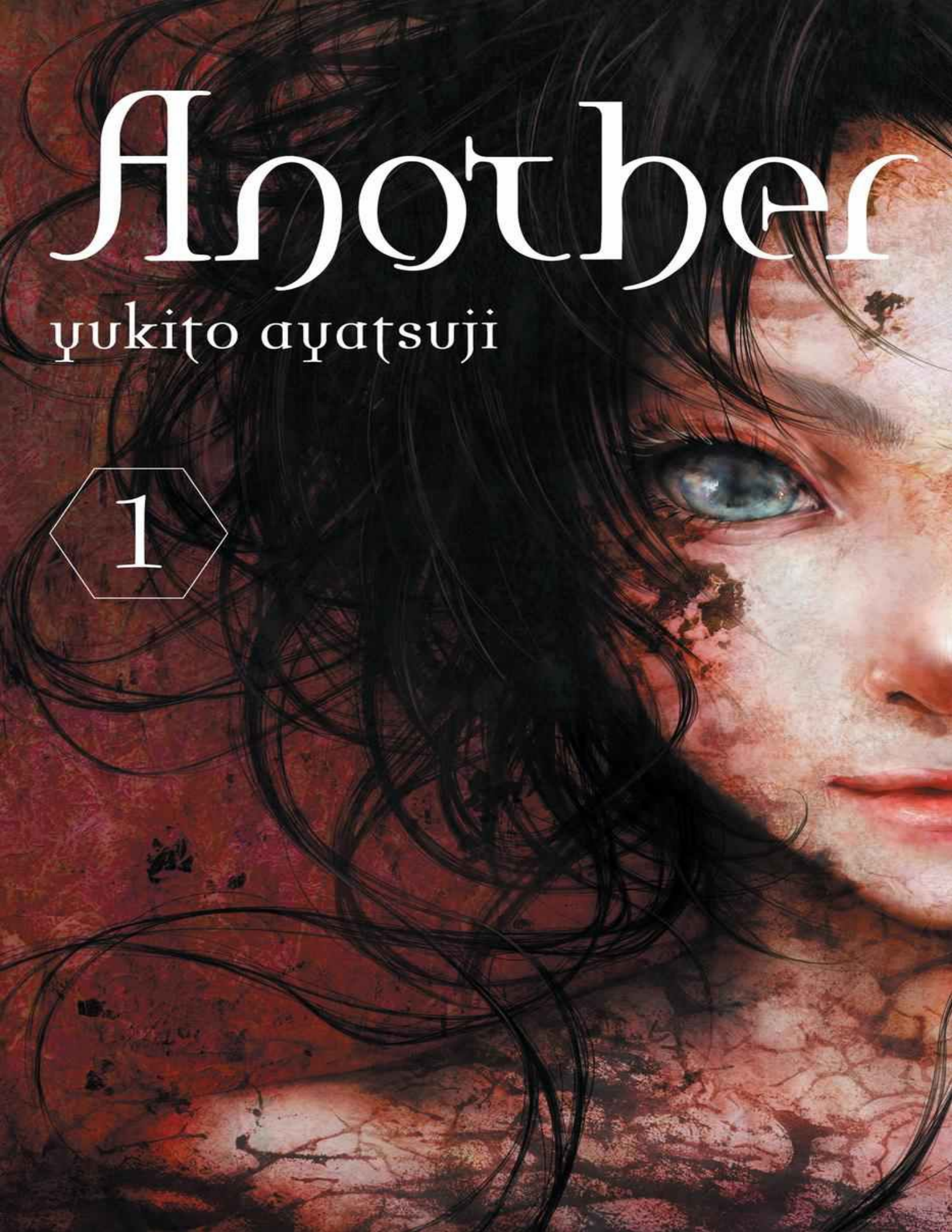
Another
yukito ayatsuji
1

Another

Volume 1

Yukito Ayatsuji

www.YenPress.com

Begin Reading

Table of Contents

Newsletters

Copyright Page

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher constitute unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

~To Dear R.M.~

Part 1

What?……Why?

Introduction

…Do you know who **Misaki** is? **The one in third-year Class 3?** Did you hear the story?

Misaki? Is that someone's name?

Yeah. No one knows what characters it's written with. It could be a last name, so it's not even necessarily a girl. Either way, *Misaki So-and-so* or *So-and-so Misaki,* there was a student named Misaki **twenty-six years ago.**

Twenty-six years? Wow, that's a long time. That's back with the last emperor.

1972. The forty-second year of Emperor Hirohito's reign. I think that was the year Okinawa was returned.

Okinawa came back? From where?

Are you stupid? America was occupying it up till then, ever since the war ended.

Oh, so that's why there're still all those graves.

Now that I think about it, the Winter Games were in Sapporo that year, too. Pretty sure the Mount Asama Lodge incident was, too…

What lodge on Mount Asama?

Are you for real? Whatever, I guess. *Anyway.* What matters is, **twenty-six years ago, there was a student named Misaki in Class 3 of the third-years**. And then…are you sure you never heard this story before?

Hmm…hold on. You're saying the kid was named Misaki? Not Masaki? If it's *Ma*-saki, then yeah, I heard a little bit about it.

Masaki? Huh. Maybe it's like that in some versions. Who'd you hear it from?

An upperclassman in my club.

What'd he say?

I dunno if it was twenty-six years ago, but there was a third-year student named Masaki a long, long time ago…and, um…the way I heard it, it was a boy. And **something really weird happened in his class that year**. But my upperclassman said it's a secret, and you're not supposed to go around talking about it. So he said he couldn't tell me anything else.

That's it?

Yeah. He said, **"If you joke around about it, bad things will happen to you."** I bet you it's one of those things. "The Seven Mysteries."

You think so?

You know how piccolo music starts playing in the music room in the middle of the night when no one's around, or how sometimes a hand all covered in blood reaches out of the lotus pond in the schoolyard? So I figure, maybe this is the seventh one.

I heard that the mannequins in the home ec room have actual heartbeats.

They totally do!

There's a ton besides that. I know like nine or ten of the "Seven Mysteries" at this middle school. But this story about Misaki or Masaki or whatever it was…I don't think it's one of those. Most of the stories feel pretty different from the rest of the "Seven Mysteries."

Wow, really? So you know the details?

A little, I guess.

Tell me!

What, you don't care if something bad happens to me?

That's just a superstition, obviously.

Yeah, you're probably right.

So tell me!

Actually, I don't know if I should…

Come on! I'll never ask you for anything else!

And how many times now has it been the last thing you'll ever ask me for?

Heh-heh.

Oh, for crying out loud. If I tell you, you can't go blabbing to everyone you know.

I won't tell anyone. I swear.

Hmmph. Okay…

Awesome.

So maybe it's Misaki or maybe it's Masaki…I guess for now, I'll say it's Misaki. Ever since their first year, this kid was popular with everyone. Brilliant student, accomplished athlete, really good at drawing, and even a talented musician. On top of all that, Misaki was gorgeous. And if he was a guy, he was chiseled. Whichever way, Misaki didn't have a single flaw.

That sounds kind of obnoxious, don't you think?

Nope, they say Misaki had a great personality, too. Not obnoxious or stuck-up at all. The kid was nice to everyone and just casual enough. That's why the teachers and students and everybody else adored Misaki. Well, you get it—Misaki was popular.

Huh. So people like that actually exist?

So third year started, and Misaki got put into Class 3 when they switched up the room assignments. And then all of a sudden, Misaki died.

Whoa.

It was still first semester, right before Misaki's fifteenth birthday.

What happened? Was it a car accident? Did Misaki get sick?

I heard it was a plane crash. Misaki's whole family was going to Hokkaido, and on the way back, the plane nose-dived. But there are other theories, too.

…

So the other kids got this horrible news, and it was a huge shock.

I bet it was.

How could this happen? everyone was shouting. Other people were wailing, *It can't be true!* And a bunch of kids were absolutely wrecked with crying. The homeroom teacher had no idea what to say to them, and the whole classroom had this otherworldly atmosphere…and in the middle of all that, somebody said: **Misaki's not dead. I mean, look. Can't you see Misaki's here?**

…

This kid pointed at Misaki's desk and said, **"Look, Misaki's right there. Where else would Misaki be? Misaki's alive and right over there."** After that, student after student chimed in, backing up that first kid. **"It's true. Misaki's not dead. Misaki's alive. Misaki's right over there…"**

…What did they mean?

Nobody wanted to believe that such a popular person had died so suddenly. They didn't want to accept it. That's what I figure. But it didn't end that day. **The class kept it going for a long time after that.**

What do you mean?

Everyone in class banded together after that and kept *pretending*, **"Hey, Misaki is still alive!"** I heard even the teacher was in on it all the way. **"It's true. You're right, all of you. Misaki isn't dead. In this classroom, at least, Misaki lives on as a member of our class. From now on, we all need to work together to graduate. All of us, together."…** Or something like that, at least.

It makes a good story, I guess. But I dunno, it's kind of creepy.

That was how they ended up spending the rest of their middle school careers. They left Misaki's desk exactly how it had been, and sometimes they would rest a hand on it and start talking to Misaki—who was supposed to be sitting there—or they would goof around with Misaki or go home together… **But of course, it was all just an act.** At the graduation ceremony, the principal was even considerate enough to set up a seat for Misaki…

Hmm. I guess it is a good story…

Yeah. Basically, this is a beautiful story with some great source material. Actually, there's a scary twist at the end.

Oh? Like what?

After graduation, they took a group photo in the classroom. The next day when they were looking at the developed picture, everyone noticed something. **In this class photo, tucked away in a corner, they could see Misaki, who couldn't possibly have been there.** Misaki's face was pale, like a corpse, and smiling like everybody else's…

Chapter 1

April

1

Spring came, I turned fifteen, and right after that, my left lung collapsed.

It was the third day after I left Tokyo to come to Yomiyama and leech off my grandparents on my mom's side. I was supposed to start at a middle school here the day after that, despite the fact that it was a little late in the term to be transferring somewhere—and just my luck, it happened the night before.

April 20, 1998.

Monday, which was supposed to be my first day at a new school—a day for me to make a fresh start—turned out to be the first day of my second-ever hospitalization. My first experience had been six months earlier. Just like last time, I'm back because my left lung collapsed.

"They told me you'll be hospitalized a week, maybe ten days."

My grandmother, Tamie, arrived at the hospital early that morning. When she gave me the news—and I was already feeling isolated in the bed of the hospital room to which I'd only just been admitted—I fought back a pain in my chest and a suffocating feeling that seemed unlikely to ever subside.

"The doctor said there's most likely no need for surgery, but they're going to start a drainage treatment. I believe it was this afternoon."

"Oh…okay."

A few hours earlier, when the ambulance brought me in, the suffocating pain in my chest had felt much fiercer. After resting for a bit, I felt as if it was starting to get better. But to be honest, it was still pretty bad. The X-ray image of one of my lungs—shriveled up in a weird twist—flashed through my mind, not that I wanted it to.

"I feel just terrible for you…so soon after you came here!"

"Oh, uh…I'm sorry, Grandma."

"Now really, there's nothing for you to feel bad about. You can't help being ill."

My grandmother looked into my face and smiled, and the wrinkles around her eyes deepened twice as much. She had turned sixty-three this year, but she still seemed sprightly and was very kind to her grandson. This, even though we had almost never spoken alone together or been so close to one another.

"Um…what about Reiko? She wasn't late to work, was she?"

"She's just fine. She stays focused, that girl. She went home and then left at the same time she always does."

"Could you tell Reiko that, um, I'm sorry for all the trouble…?"

Late the night before, out of nowhere, I was struck by familiar symptoms. There was a disturbing gurgling sensation coming from inside my chest, and that unique, splitting pain, and then the tightness. The moment I realized *It's happening again?* I'd run with the SOS, half-panicked, to Reiko, who had still been awake in the

living room.

There were eleven years between my mother, who had died, and this younger sister of hers—which makes her my aunt. As soon as I told her what was happening, she called an ambulance. And she even went with me to the hospital.

Thank you, Reiko.

I owe you so much.

I wanted to proclaim my gratitude in my loudest voice, but in my condition, I was in too much pain to even think about doing that. Not to mention that I had trouble talking to her face-to-face…I dunno, I just get really nervous.

"I brought you a change of clothes. If there's anything else you need, you let me know."

"…Thank you."

I thanked my grandmother in a rasping voice as she set a large paper bag down beside the bed. The pain seemed to increase when I shifted inattentively, so I lifted my chin slightly toward her and kept my head on the pillow.

"Grandma, um…what about my dad?"

"I haven't told him yet. Do you suppose Yosuke is in India by now? I'm not sure how to reach him. I'll ask Reiko tonight."

"That's okay; I'll get in touch with him. If you just bring me the cell phone I left in my room…"

"Oh-ho, is that so?"

My dad's name is Yosuke Sakakibara. He works for some famous university in Tokyo doing research for cultural anthropology or socioecology or something like that. He became a professor in his early forties, so he must be a pretty exceptional researcher. Still, I can't help harboring some pretty strong doubts about how exceptional he is as a father.

Anyway, he doesn't live at home anymore.

He casts off his only son and leaves the house empty while he flies around Japan and to other countries, doing I don't even know what—fieldwork, I guess. Thanks to that, ever since elementary school, I've had this weird confidence that my ability to keep house, at least, is better than any of my fellow students'.

Like my grandmother said, my dad had gone to India the previous week for work. The job had come up with practically no notice during spring vacation. He would be staying there and devoting himself to surveys and research activities for almost a year. Those are the basic circumstances that led me to being taken into my grandparents' home in Yomiyama with hardly any warning.

"Koichi, are you and your father getting along?" my grandmother asked.

"Sure, I guess," I replied. Even if I thought it was tough having him for a father, it's not as if I hated him.

"Still, Yosuke is such a dutiful man!" She sounded as if she was speaking mostly to herself. "All this time has passed since Ritsuko died, and yet he still hasn't remarried. And he does so much to help us, too, at the least little word from us."

Ritsuko is my mom's name. Fifteen years ago—the year I was born—she passed away at the young age of twenty-six. My father, Yosuke, was ten years older than her.

From what I'd heard, my dad first saw my mom while he was working as a lecturer at his school, and she was one of his students. He won her over almost as soon as they met. "You work fast," one of his old friends said when visiting our house one time, teasing my dad relentlessly. The guy seemed drunk.

It was hard to conceive that my dad had lived without any women in his life ever since my mom died. I admit I'm speaking as his son, but he's a talented researcher, and even though he's fifty-one years old, he's a youthful man with a sweet personality who's pretty handsome. He's got a pretty good position in society and makes decent money, and since he's single on top of all that, I can't believe he's not more popular.

Was he fulfilling an obligation to his deceased wife? Or being considerate of my feelings? Whatever it was, it had been long enough. I wanted him to get married again sometime and stop pushing the work of managing his household off on his son. That probably accounted for half of my feelings on the subject.

2

A "collapsed lung" is, in fact, a condition called "spontaneous pneumothorax." More correctly referred to as "primary spontaneous pneumothorax." It's common among young men who have a tall, thin

body type. The cause is pretty much unknown, but it's said that in more than a few cases, fatigue or stress can be a trigger in combination with a person's basic physique.

Just like it sounds, "collapsed" means that part of the lung ruptures and air leaks into the pleural cavity. The balance of pressure gets messed up, and the lung withers up like a balloon with a hole in it. It's associated with chest pain and difficulty breathing.

This illness, the mere thought of which is terrifying—it was six months ago, in October of last year, when I first experienced it.

At first, a weird pain started in my chest, and it felt as though if I moved, I would immediately lose my breath. I thought if I just waited it out it would get better, but after a couple days, I still hadn't improved. In fact, it was getting worse and worse, so I told my dad about it and we went to the hospital. As soon as they took an X-ray, it became clear that my left lung had undergone a pneumothorax and was in an intermediate state of collapse. I was hospitalized the same day.

The lead physician decided to give me a treatment called "pleural drainage."

I was given a local anesthetic; then they cut my chest open with a scalpel and inserted a thin tube called a trocar catheter into my pleural cavity.

The treatment continued for a full week while my collapsed lung reinflated to its original shape and the hole sealed up, and then I was released without further incident. At the time, the physician used the words "full recovery," but in the same breath he told us, "The chance

of recurrence is fifty percent."

Back then, I tried not to think too deeply about how much of a risk that was. About all I did was acknowledge that, okay, I might get like that again someday. But I never thought I would face this miserable fate so quickly and with such bad timing…

To be honest, I was pretty depressed.

After my grandmother went home, first thing that afternoon I was called to a treatment room in the internal medicine department, where they began the pleural drainage, just like six months before.

Luckily the lead physician wasn't terrible. The pain had been incredible when they shoved the tube into me six months ago, but this time it wasn't bad at all. Just like last time, if the air escaped through the tube and my lung reinflated and the hole closed up, I'd be set for a welcome release. However, they told me that when the condition has recurred once already like this, the risk of another relapse is even higher. If it kept happening, they would have to consider surgery. Hearing that made me even more depressed.

My grandmother came again that evening and brought me my cell phone. But I would tell my dad what was going on in the morning. That's what I decided.

It wasn't as if rushing to tell him would change anything. My condition wasn't life-threatening, and there was no need to worry him by letting him hear how feeble my voice was.

The respirator beside my bed emitted a soft huffing, the sound of the air it sucked out of my chest being expelled through water inside

the machine.

I remembered the generic warning label that said “may interfere with medical devices” and turned my cell phone off. Then, feeling annoyed by the familiar pain and tightness, I looked out the window of my room.

I was in the municipal hospital’s inpatient ward, an old five-story building. My room was on the fourth floor.

I could see hazy points of white illumination below the darkening sky. They were city lights from the tiny mountain town where Ritsuko, the mother I knew only from photographs, had been born and raised. Yomiyama.

How many times have I visited this town now?

The thought cut across my consciousness idly.

There were only a very few instances that I remembered. I don’t recall much from when I was little. Maybe three or four times in elementary school. Was this the first time since starting middle school?…Or maybe not.

I was pondering that *maybe not* when my mind ground to an abrupt halt. A deep noise was building out of nowhere: *vmmmm.* It hung over me, felt as though it was crushing me…

Unconsciously, I let out a small sigh.

The anesthetic must have worn off. The incision below my armpit, where the tube had been inserted, was throbbing, mingling with the ever-present chest pain.

3

My grandmother came to see me every day after that.

The hospital was pretty far from home, I thought, but she would laugh lightly and tell me it wasn't much trouble since she drove herself. Here was a grandmother you could count on. Although—stuff at home was probably getting neglected at least a little bit, and she must have been worried about my grandfather, Ryohei, who'd been getting a little senile lately…I felt terrible regardless. Thank you, Grandma—I couldn't help expressing my deep gratitude in my heart.

The effects of the pleural drainage were going according to schedule, and on my third day in the hospital, the pain had pretty much subsided, too. The problem that arose then was sheer boredom. I still couldn't even walk around on my own.

For one thing, my body remained linked to a machine via a tube. Additionally, I had an IV drip twice a day. It was pretty tough even getting to the bathroom, and of course, I hadn't been able to shower for a couple of days.

My room was a small one-person deal that included a little coin-operated TV, but even if I turned it on, they only air boring shows in the middle of the day. Should I give up and watch anyway, or read one of the books that my grandmother brought for me, or listen to music…? This was how I passed the time that no one would have called relaxing: in idleness.

On my sixth day in the hospital—April 25—a Saturday afternoon, Reiko came to my room.

"I'm so sorry I haven't been able to come see you, Koichi."

She told me apologetically that she got home from work late during the week no matter how hard she tried, but of course, I understood that perfectly well. If I complained about it, I'd have been the one who needed to apologize.

With as much cheerfulness as I could manage, I told her about my condition and how I was recovering. About the lead physician's prediction, which I'd received that morning, that if everything went well I'd be discharged early next week, and at the latest definitely sometime that month…

"Then you should be able to go to school after Golden Week, huh?"

Reiko turned her eyes to the window. I was sitting up in my bed, so my gaze naturally followed hers.

"This hospital is built on a hill near a mountain called Yumigaoka. At the eastern edge of town…well, look. What you see over there is a bunch of mountains to the west. There's also a place called Asamidai over there."

"What weird names."

"Yumigaoka, because you can get a gorgeous view of the setting sun, and Asami, because you get a gorgeous view of the sunrise. I guess that's where the names come from."

"But the name of the town is Yomiyama, right?"

“There’s a mountain that’s actually called Yomiyama north of here. The town is in a basin, but the entire thing consists of gentle hills running south to north.”

I didn’t have a complete grasp of the fundamental geography of the town yet. Maybe Reiko had noticed, which had prompted her simplistic tour. Maybe she thought, seeing the view out the window, that this presented the perfect opportunity.

“Do you see that over there?” Reiko raised her right hand and pointed. “That green bit running all the way north to south. That’s the Yomiyama River that runs through the middle of town. On the other side of it, do you see? That’s the field at school. Can you make it out?”

“Oh…uh…”

I lifted the top half of my body off the bed and squinted in the direction Reiko was pointing.

“Oh, that wide, white spot?”

“That’s it.” Reiko turned back around toward me and smiled faintly. “That’s Yomiyama North Middle. The school you’ll be attending.”

“Interesting.”

“You went to a private school in Tokyo, right? One of those escalator schools with integrated middle and high schools?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You might feel a little out of place at public school…But you’ll

do fine, won't you?"

"Probably, yeah."

"You're going to be behind on the work for April, what with this sudden hospitalization."

"Oh, I'm not worried about that. At my last school, we were already halfway done with the stuff for third-year middle school."

"Well, well, impressive. Studying's going to be such a breeze for you."

"I don't know if it'll be that easy."

"I suppose I'm obligated to tell you not to get cocky."

"Did you go to that school, Reiko?"

"Yup. I graduated fourteen years ago, I think it was. Now you're going to figure out how old I am."

"So then my mom went there, too?"

"Yup. Ritsuko came out of North Middle, too. There's also a school called Yomiyama South Middle in town, which is South Middle. Some people also call North Middle 'North Yomi.'"

"North Yomi? Oh, I get it."

Reiko, dressed in a black pantsuit and beige blouse, had a slender build and a fair-skinned, slender face. Her stick-straight hair grew past her shoulders.

With that haircut, her features seemed somehow to resemble my mother's, whose face I knew only from photographs. When that

realization struck me, every atom of my heart began to ache helplessly, as if infused with a flush of fever. I said that I'm bad at talking to Reiko face-to-face like this because I get nervous; that's eight-tenths of the problem, and this was probably the root.

"I guess if you're not worried about the schoolwork, then the problem really will be the difference in how they do things at public school. You'll probably be confused about some things at first, but I'm sure you'll get used to it soon enough."

And then Reiko told me that once I came home from the hospital and could start attending school, she would tell me "the North Yomi fundamentals." Then her eyes fell to the paperbacks on my bedside table.

"Huh. I didn't know you liked these kinds of books, Koichi."

"Oh, uh…I guess."

There were four books in all. They were both long books broken into two volumes: *'Salem's Lot* and *Pet Sematary* by Stephen King. I'd finished the first volume of *Pet Sematary* right before Reiko came by.

"In that case, I'll tell you about the 'Seven Mysteries' of North Yomi, too."

"'The Seven Mysteries'?"

"Every school has them, but North Yomi's are a little bit different. It's gone up to more than eight since I went there. You're not interested?"

Honestly, I didn't really care about real-life ghost stories like that,

but…

“No, you’ve definitely got to tell me,” I replied, crafting a smile for her.

4

Before lunch on the next day—the 26th. A Sunday.

Like always, my grandmother had come to present me with miscellaneous odds and ends. Then, with a formulaic “All right, I’ll see you again tomorrow,” she left me and returned home. She must have passed right by them. I never would have expected or even thought to dream up these visitors who had come to see me.

There was a knock, and the door to my room opened. It was a young nurse named Mizuno whom I had been relying on completely ever since I’d been admitted. “Go ahead,” she said, ushering them in: a boy and a girl I had never seen before in my life. I was, of course, surprised, but since they were both roughly my age and wearing school uniforms, I soon guessed where this visit had originated.

“Hello. You’re Koichi Sakakibara, right?”

The ambassador (or so it felt to me) on the right spoke—the boy. Medium build, medium height. Black school uniform with a standing collar. Silver-rimmed glasses accented his smooth, soft-featured face and narrow eyes.

“We’re students from Yomiyama North Middle, third-year Class 3.”

“Ah…hi.”

“My name is Kazami. Tomohiko Kazami. And this is Sakuragi.”

“Yukari Sakuragi. Nice to meet you.”

The girl wore a navy blazer. They were both completely run-of-the-mill middle school uniforms, but the style was totally different from the private school I’d attended in Tokyo.

“Sakuragi and I are the class representatives for Class 3, so we’ve come on everyone else’s behalf.”

From my perch in the bed, I grunted, then cocked my head and asked the most obvious question. “Why are you here?”

“You’re transferring to our school, right?” Yukari Sakuragi asked. She, too, wore silver-rimmed glasses, just like Kazami. She had a slightly chubby build and a simple haircut that came to her shoulders. “You were actually supposed to start last Monday, but then you got sick all of a sudden…that’s what we heard. So we decided to visit you as class representatives. Um, this is from all of us.”

She held out a bouquet of colorful tulips. Tulips mean “considerateness” or “philanthropy.” I learned that later, when I looked it up.

“The teacher was asking how you were doing, too,” Tomohiko Kazami continued. “We heard it was a lung condition called pneumothorax. Are you all right?”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.”

As I answered, I stifled the smile that was rising on my face. I'd been caught off guard by their sudden visit, but I was also genuinely pleased by it. Plus, the way the two of them had come here was so picturesque—they almost seemed like "class representative" characters you'd see in an anime or something. So that also struck me as oddly amusing.

"Fortunately…I guess that's what I'm supposed to say, even in a situation like this. I'm recuperating on schedule, so I think they'll be able to take the tube out soon."

"That's a relief."

"What a horrible thing to have happen so suddenly."

As they spoke, the two emissaries of third-year Class 3 looked at each other.

"We heard that you moved here from Tokyo, Sakakibara," Sakuragi said as she set the tulips on the windowsill. For some reason, it sounded as if she was gently feeling me out.

I nodded, "Yeah."

"You were at K*** Middle School, weren't you? That's amazing. It's such a famous private school. Why did you…?"

"We came here for family reasons."

"Is this your first time living in Yomiyama?"

"It is…But why would you ask that?"

"I just thought maybe you'd lived here, even if it was a long time ago."

"I've visited before, but I never lived here."

"Did you ever stay for very long?" Kazami came with the follow-up.

What weird questions— The thought nagged at me slightly, and I gave a vague response. "Eh. My mom is from here. I guess when I was still little I might have, but I don't really remember…"

Their rapid-fire interrogation ended there, and Kazami walked toward the bed. "Here." He pulled a large envelope from his bag and handed it to me.

"What's this?"

"Notes for classes since the start of first semester. I made a copy, so if you want them, you can have them."

"Wow. You didn't have to do that! Thank you."

When I peeked at the contents of the envelope in my hands, I saw it was, indeed, all stuff I'd already learned at my old school. Still, his consideration touched me, and I thanked them again. If this was how it was going to be, I might actually be able to forget all the terrible stuff that had been happening since the previous year.

"I think I'll be able to start school after we get back from Golden Week. I'm looking forward to it."

"Us, too."

I thought I saw Kazami shoot Sakuragi a wink, and then, with a vaguely hesitant expression, he held his right hand out to me.

"Err, Sakakibara? Would you shake hands?"

That left me speechless for a second.

Shake hands? The boy who was class representative was suddenly asking to shake hands, the very first time we'd ever met each other… in a place like this? What did that even…?

I considered that maybe I should just let it go and say, well, public school students are different. Or maybe it was a difference between Tokyo and the countryside? A difference in attitudes?

The thoughts went around and around in my head, but I could hardly reject him and say "Uh, no." I played it innocent and extended my right hand, too.

There wasn't much force behind Kazami's handshake, even though he was the one who'd offered. And maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I felt *dampness*, as if he was in a cold sweat.

5

My eighth day in the hospital, Monday, was the day of a modest liberation.

When they confirmed that the "leak" of air from my lung had stopped completely, they took out the drainage tube. This meant I was finally freed from my link to the machine. When the procedure wrapped up in the morning, I left my room to escort my visiting grandmother out of the building so that I could breathe the open air for the first time in a long while.

According to the doctor, they would watch my condition for another two days, and if there was no change, I could be released. But I would have to rest as much as possible for a little while. I understood that part painfully well without having to be told, given my experience six months earlier. So I couldn't go to school until May 6, which was after the break, after all.

I watched my grandmother's rugged, inky-black Nissan Cedric drive off, and then I sat down on a bench I'd found in the front lawn of the inpatient ward.

It was beautiful weather, befitting the day of my liberation.

Warm spring sunbeams. Brisk, cool breeze. I could hear the chirping of wild birds here and there, probably because the mountains were so close by. I even heard the cry of a warbler, a sound unheard-of in Tokyo, occasionally cutting into the other songs.

I closed my eyes and took slow, deep breaths. The place where the tube had been ached a bit, but the chest pain and difficulty breathing had disappeared completely. Yeah, this was good. How wondrous a thing to be healthy!

After sinking into a momentary swell of emotion that I wouldn't exactly call youthful, I took out my cell phone, which I'd brought with me from my room. This seemed like a good enough time to call my dad. I was outside the building, so I didn't have to be worried about the warnings against "interfering with medical devices" and whatever.

I was pretty sure the time difference between Japan and India was

three hours, or maybe four. It was after eleven o'clock where I was, so seven or eight o'clock there?

After some hesitation, I ended up turning off the cell phone I'd just activated. I knew very well how my dad slept in in the morning. He was probably pretty tired what with his survey/research activities in a foreign country, too. It would have been cruel to roust him from bed for this after all this time.

I sat on the bench zoning out for a while after that. When I got to my feet, it was because lunchtime was approaching. I want to be clear: The hospital food did not taste good. But for a fifteen-year-old recovering from illness, hunger is a life-or-death issue.

I went back to the inpatient ward, cut through the lobby, and headed for the elevator bay. The doors to one elevator were just starting to close, so I quickly squeezed through them.

There was already someone on the elevator.

"Oh, excuse me."

I apologized offhandedly for my intrusion. But the moment I laid eyes on this other person, I couldn't help gasping.

It was a girl in a school uniform.

The same navy blazer as Yukari Sakuragi had worn when she'd visited the day before. Did that mean this girl also went to Yomiyama North Middle? Shouldn't she have been at school at this time of day?

She was petite and slightly built and had an androgynous face, the bone structure of which was too fine. Pure black hair in a shaggy

bob cut. Her skin color was quite washed out, in contrast. I'm not sure what to call it, but it looked like white paraffin, to use a somewhat old-fashioned term. Plus…

The thing that caught my attention more than anything was the white eye patch bandaging her left eye. Did she have some kind of eye disease? Or had she been hurt?

With my mind caught up in all these thoughts, I was embarrassingly slow to realize the direction the elevator I'd chosen was traveling. It was going down, not up. I wasn't headed for the upper floors; the car had started moving toward the basement.

I looked at the buttons arrayed on the control panel and saw that "B2" was lit up. Letting my own button selection slide, I seized on an impulse and spoke to the girl with the eye patch.

"I'm sorry, are you a student at North Yomi?"

The girl barely nodded her head, silent, showing no hint of any other movement.

"You're going to the second basement level? Is there something you need to do down there?"

"Yes."

"But it's not—"

"I'm dropping something off."

Her tone of voice was cool and detached, as if all her emotions had been shut off.

"Half my body is waiting there, the poor thing."

While I stood bewildered by those enigmatic words, the elevator stopped and the doors opened.

The girl in the eye patch slipped silently past me and went out into the hallway, her footsteps making no sound. Something sickly pale protruded through a gap in her hands, pressed tightly against her chest. My eyes fixed on it. I could see something pale, a tiny doll hand…

"Hey."

I held the elevator doors open and stuck my head and shoulders out to call after the girl.

"What's your name?"

The girl, the only person walking down the dimly lit hallway, reacted to my voice and came to a momentary standstill. But she didn't turn around.

"Mei," she answered curtly. "Mei…Misaki."

Then the girl walked away, as if gliding over the linoleum floor. I watched her go, not breathing, while experiencing a touch of despondency and, at the same time, a foreboding that I could hardly find words to describe.

The second basement level of the inpatient ward.

I didn't think there were even exam rooms or nursing rooms on this floor, let alone patients' rooms. It was knowledge I'd absorbed naturally while hospitalized. All that was down there were the food storage rooms, the mechanical rooms, and—I was pretty sure—the memorial chapel.

…In any event.

This was the first up-close encounter I shared with the strange girl —Mei. By the time I learned that “Misaki” was written with the characters for “viewing the cliffs” and Mei was “sound,” April had ended and May had just barely begun.

Chapter 2

May I

1

"Morning, Ray."

I admit it was adorable, but the more I heard it, the more oddly unsettling the shrill voice became. I don't know what it was thinking about, but it's such a pain having someone come at you that cheerfully so early in the morning.

"Ray. Morning, Ray."

Ray is supposed to be *your* name. But of course, my grumbling had no impact. Because the object of my frustration wasn't a person, it was a bird.

It was a mynah bird my grandparents kept as a pet.

My grandmother said it was so small, it was probably a female. And they named it "Ray." It was—and this gets another "probably" attached—two years old. They'd bought it on impulse at a pet shop two years ago in the fall.

The square cage in which she (…probably) lived was set on one end of the porch facing the garden. Apparently it was a special cage for mynah birds made of thick bamboo strips.

"Morning, Ray. Morning."

May 6, Wednesday morning.

I had woken up at a ridiculously early hour—just after five A.M.

During my ten days of hospitalization, a well-regulated lifestyle of early-to-bed and early-to-rise had been inculcated in me, but five A.M. was too early for anyone. It had been well past midnight the night before when I went to bed, so for a fifteen-year-old boy who was trying to get healthy, the lack of sleep was egregious, too.

Just one more hour, I thought, closing my eyes. But I didn't think I was going to fall back asleep again. I gave up after five minutes, got out of bed, and headed to the bathroom in my pajamas.

"Well, well, Koichi! You're up early!"

When I had washed my face and brushed my teeth, my grandmother came out of her bedroom. She looked me over, then tilted her head, appearing slightly concerned.

"You feel all right, don't you?"

"I feel fine. I just woke up, is all."

"That's all right then. You shouldn't push yourself."

"Like I said, I'm fine."

I gave her an easy smile and thumped myself on the chest. Then—

It happened just as I returned to my study room/bedroom, while I was thinking about how to kill the time before breakfast. My cell phone, which I had connected to its charger, started ringing on my desk.

Who was that? At this hour…

I only wondered for a moment. There was only one person who would make this cell phone ring at such an ungodly hour.

“Hey, there, good morning. How are you doing?”

The sunny voice I heard when I picked up the phone belonged, just as I’d predicted, to my dad.

“It’s two in the morning here. India sure is hot.”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing’s up. You’re starting school today, right? I’m calling to cheer you on! You should thank me.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“How are you doing, physically? Have you been resting since you got out of the hospital? After all…”

His voice suddenly started to crackle and almost cut out as he began to ask me a question. I checked the LCD screen, and the bars showing the signal strength were barely holding at one. Even that one flickered in and out unreliably.

“…Are you listening to me, Koichi?”

“Hold on. I’m not getting a good signal here.”

I left my room as I answered, wandering around searching for a spot where the signal seemed good…and the spot I found was the porch on the first floor where Ray’s mynah cage sat.

“Physically, I’m good. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

I answered the question I’d put on hold as I opened the glass door to the porch. I had called and told him about my current attack and treatment the day I left the hospital.

“Still, why are you calling so early? It’s only 5:30 here.”

“You must be nervous heading into a new school. Plus you’re getting over your illness, on top of everything. That’s why you woke up so early, right?”

Oh man, he knows me so well.

“That’s just how you are. You try to be so tough, but in reality, you have a pretty thin skin. You take after your dad that way.”

“Don’t you mean I take after my mom?”

“Well, that may be, but…” Changing his tone somewhat, my dad continued, “As far as this pneumothorax issue goes, you shouldn’t brood over it more than necessary. When I was young, I did that.”

“Wha…? You did? I’ve never heard that story before.”

“I missed my chance to tell you six months ago. I didn’t want to be told it was hereditary or something.”

“…This is hereditary?”

“My second one happened a year later, but after that, I never had another recurrence. If there is some hereditary link, then you should be out of the woods now, too.”

“That would be nice, anyway.”

“It’s a lung disease. Now you have to quit smoking.”

“I don’t smoke!”

“At any rate, just tell yourself you’re not going to have a third one, and keep your chin up. Ah—although, you know, no need to

stress yourself trying."

"I know, I know. I'll take it easy."

"Good. Say hello to Grandma and Grandpa for me. India is so hot!"

And so the call ended. Letting out a long breath, I went through the door I'd opened and sat down on the porch. As soon as I did, the mynah bird, Ray, started up with her bizarre voice again, as if she had been lying in wait.

"Morning, Ray. Morning."

I ignored it for a little while, staring outside idly.

The full bloom of the red azalea hedges was beautiful through the thin morning mist that was rising. There was a modest pond in the garden, and I heard that my grandfather used to keep koi in it, but I couldn't see any fish there now. It looked as though it wasn't being sufficiently cared for. The water was a murky, dark green color.

"Ray. Ray, morning."

The mynah bird kept talking so persistently that she (…probably) beat me down and I replied, "All right, I get it. Good morning, Ray. You sure are cheery first thing in the morning, Ray."

"Cheery. Cheery." She ran through her repertoire of words. "Cheery…Cheer up."

I don't think I need to say that this did not constitute anything as grandiose as human-avian communication. But still, I felt a little bit more like smiling.

“Okay. Thanks,” I replied.

2

After dinner the night before, I had talked with Reiko for a while.

She was using the snug little side house behind the main building as a home office/bedroom and would often shut herself up in there after coming home from work, but of course, there were also days when she didn’t do that. The night when I’d had my pneumothorax attack, she’d been watching TV in the living room. It’s just that there were exactly zero times that we gathered as a family around the table for dinner.

“Do you want to hear about the ‘Seven Mysteries of North Yomi’?”

My rescheduled first day at school was the following day, after the break ended, and of course, Reiko knew that. She had probably remembered the promise she’d made when she came to see me at the hospital.

“I told you that North Yomi is a little different, right?”

“Yeah, you mentioned that.”

Once my grandmother had finished cleaning up after dinner, she made coffee for us. Reiko took a sip of hers, which was black.

“Well? Do you want to hear about it?”

She fixed her eyes on me from across the table and smiled faintly.

As usual, I was plenty nervous under the surface, but I accepted her challenge.

"Er…yeah. But, uh, it wouldn't be much fun hearing all of it at once."

She said North Yomi was different, but it was probably just variations on the same old ghost stories. A staircase somewhere in the school building gets an extra step, or it loses one, or the plaster sculptures in the art room cry tears of blood or whatever.

"One or two, at least."

If I knew about them, maybe I could kick off conversations with my new classmates, I thought.

"All right, then I'll tell you the one I heard first, a long time ago. At least."

What Reiko told me then was a "mystery" involving the shed for raising animals that used to be behind the gymnasium.

One morning, all the rabbits and marmots they had been keeping in there disappeared. The door to the shed was broken, and there were smears from a huge amount of blood inside. The school contacted the police, which started a big uproar, but they never found a single one of the animals that had disappeared and never discovered who had committed the act. The shed was torn down soon after, but in the place the shed had once been, blood-spattered rabbits and marmots (or their ghosts?) could be seen sometimes.

"There's a strange embellishment to this story," Reiko continued with a serious expression. "When the police tested the blood marks

left in the shed, they found it wasn't rabbit blood or marmot blood. It was human. Type AB, Rh negative."

When I heard that, I couldn't help murmuring, "Wow. Was there anybody in the area who'd been badly hurt? Or any missing persons?"

"Not a single one."

"Hmm."

"Come on, isn't that mysterious?"

"Hmm. But that embellishment is more like a detective story than a ghost story. There might have been a concrete solution to it."

"I wonder."

After that, Reiko did exactly as she'd promised and told me a few of the "North Yomi fundamentals."

First: If you're on the roof and you hear the cawing of a crow, when you go back inside, you must enter with your left foot.

Second: When you become a third-year, you must not fall down on the road that goes down the hill outside the back gates.

Those two sounded like superstitions that had been passed down for a long time. If you disobeyed "The First" and didn't go inside with your left foot, you would get hurt within a month. If you disobeyed "The Second" and fell down the hill, you would fail your high school entrance exams. That was what people were warned.

Next, "The Third" broke the mold and was an unpleasantly realistic "fundamental."

“You must at all costs obey whatever the class decides.”

Reiko said it with her serious expression unchanged.

“The school you went to in Tokyo, K*** Middle School, had a pretty liberal atmosphere, despite being a private escalator school, am I right? They valued the individual desires of each student. At a public school in the countryside like North Yomi, it’s pretty much the opposite. How something affects the group is more important than the individual. So…”

So essentially, even if there’s some issue you find kind of distasteful, you close your eyes and go along with everyone else? That wasn’t such tough advice. There were times I had tried to do that at my other school, too, to one extent or another…

I lowered my eyes slightly and brought my coffee cup to my lips. Reiko went on talking, looking serious. The Fourth fundamental at North Yomi…

“Koichi!”

I heard my grandmother’s cheery voice, breaking off my quiet reflections.

I was sitting on the porch hugging my knees, still in my pajamas. The tranquil morning air and the placid sunlight felt good, and somehow I had wound up rooted to the spot.

“Time for breakfast, Koichi!”

It sounded as if she was at the bottom of the stairs, calling up to the second floor.

Time for breakfast…already? I considered and looked at the clock on the wall. It was just before seven o'clock…Wait, what? That meant I'd been sitting there staring into space for a whole hour. What was wrong with me?

"It's time to eat, Koichi."

This time I heard not my grandmother, but my grandfather's croaking voice. And from somewhere nearby.

Startled, I looked behind me.

I'd heard the voice from the eight-mat room on the other side of the screens dividing the porch. I hadn't noticed at all, but my grandfather had come in at some point. When I opened the screen gingerly, he was sitting in front of the Buddhist altar set up in there, wearing a thin brown cardigan over his nightclothes.

"Oh—morning, Grandpa."

"Yes, yes, g'morning," my grandfather replied in a drawl. "Are you going to the hospital again today, Koichi?"

"Come on, Grandpa, I was released already. I'm going to *school* today. School."

"Oho, to school! Yes, that's right."

My grandfather was extremely small in stature, and when he sat on the floor hunched over in a ball, he looked like a wrinkly monkey decorating the altar. He was over seventy years old, I'm pretty sure. He'd aged noticeably in the last two or three years, and he'd started to show signs of senility in just about every aspect of his behavior.

“You’re in middle school now, are you, Koichi?”

“Yeah, my third year. Next year is high school.”

“My, my. I wonder if Yosuke’s staying healthy.”

“He’s in India right now. He called a little while ago, and he’s the same as ever.”

“Good health is more important than anything. If only poor Ritsuko hadn’t…”

He suddenly mentioned my mom’s name, then put his fingertips to his eyes and wiped away tears. Had the memory of his daughter’s death fifteen years ago come back to him so vividly? That sort of thing might happen a lot with older folks, but I didn’t have the slightest idea how I should handle it since I only knew my mother’s face from photographs.

“Ah, here you are.”

Finally my grandmother came and saved me from my quandary.

“It’s time for breakfast, Koichi. Why don’t you go change and get your things together?”

“Oh, yeah. Where’s Reiko?”

“She left already.”

“Oh. She goes in early, huh?”

I stood up and closed the glass door to the porch.

“I’ll drive you in today,” my grandmother said.

“Huh? You don’t have to do that…”

I had looked up how to get to school. It was far enough that it would take a little less than an hour to go on foot, but if I took a bus, I could cut it down to twenty or thirty minutes.

"Today's your first day, and besides, you're still recovering. Isn't that right, Grandpa?"

"Eh? Oh, yes, that's right."

"But…"

"No need to be polite. Come on, hurry up and get ready. You still need to eat your breakfast."

"…Okay."

Without forgetting my phone, which I had tossed aside, I left the porch. Just then, the mynah bird that had stayed quiet for so long suddenly exclaimed in a shrill voice, "Why, Ray? Why?"

3

The teacher in charge of third-year Class 3 was Mr. Kubodera. He was a middle-aged man whose subject was language arts. You could call him good-natured—he seemed to be—and you could have called him unreliable, since he certainly looked the part.

When I went to the teachers' office to say hello, Mr. Kubodera glanced over the papers in front of him.

"You did excellently at your last school, I must say, Sakakibara. To get grades like these at K*** Middle School is no small feat."

Granted it was our first meeting, but why would he speak so deferentially to a student? Plus, he hadn't looked me in the face the entire time. I felt kind of uncomfortable, but nevertheless, I would be no less polite than he was.

"Thank you very much," I replied. "That's kind of you to say."

"You're doing all right now, physically?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I'm sure they did things differently where you come from, but I hope you'll get along with everyone. We may be a public school, but we don't have problems with violence or disorderly classroom conduct the way the public imagines. So there's no need to worry on that score. If you run into any problems, please let me know. Don't be shy. You can talk to me or my assistant—"

Mr. Kubodera's eyes turned to the younger woman at his side, who had been watching our conversation.

"—Ms. Mikami, of course."

"I will," I said with a nod, feeling enormously nervous. For my school transfer, my dad had bought me a brand-new school uniform (life expectancy: one year), but it wasn't broken in yet, so naturally, it felt tight.

"I look forward to your class."

My voice was keyed up with nerves, but I bowed to Ms. Mikami —her subject was art. Ms. Mikami smiled gently. "We'll have a good year."

“Um, yes, ma’am.”

The conversation broke off and surrendered to a brittle silence.

The two teachers stole glances back and forth, trying to read each other’s faces, then both of them opened their mouths to say something—or so it seemed. But just then, the warning bell for classes rang. They closed their mouths, as if the opportunity had passed—or so it seemed.

“Well, then, shall we?” Mr. Kubodera picked up his attendance sheet and stood. “Morning homeroom starts at 8:30. Let’s introduce you to everyone.”

4

When they had led me to the door of the classroom for third-year Class 3, the two teachers shot each other another look and opened their mouths once more to say something—or so it seemed, but this time it was the actual bell that rang. Giving a single, deliberate-sounding cough, Mr. Kubodera opened the door to the classroom.

The buzz of all the students talking was like static on the radio. Footsteps, footsteps, the sound of chairs dragging and being sat upon, the sound of bags opening, the sound of bags being closed…

Mr. Kubodera went in ahead of me, then ushered me in with a glance, and I stepped into the classroom. Ms. Mikami came in last and stood beside me.

“Good morning, everyone.”

Mr. Kubodera spread the attendance sheet open on a lectern and then slowly passed his gaze over the room to take attendance.

"I see that Akazawa and Takabayashi are out today."

Apparently they didn't do the customary "stand, greet, sit" here. Was this another difference between public and private school? Or a local thing?

"Has everyone recovered from Golden Week yet? Today, we'll begin by introducing a transfer student."

The noise gradually died down, and the classroom fell silent. Mr. Kubodera gestured at me from the lectern. "Go on," Ms. Mikami ordered in a low voice.

I could feel the eyes of the class focusing on me; it was almost painful. I took a quick look out across the room and saw there were about thirty of them…But there was no time to take in more than that as I headed over to the podium. *Argh, this tension is making my chest tight. It's getting harder to breathe, too.* I had been prepared for something of the kind, but a situation like this was vicious on the delicate nerves of a boy who had been suffering from a lung condition up until just the previous week.

"Um…hello."

Then I declared my name to my new classmates, who wore black standing collars or navy blazers. Mr. Kubodera wrote it out for them on the blackboard.

Koichi Sakakibara.

I steadied myself forcibly. I was trembling pathetically (and I'm

saying that about myself), searching the mood in the room. But I couldn't detect any worrisome **reactions**.

"I came to Yomiyama from Tokyo last month. My dad's working, so I'll be living here for a while with my grandparents…"

Mentally, I was rubbing my chest to relax it as I continued my self-introduction.

"I was supposed to start school here on the twentieth last month, but I got kind of sick and was in the hospital…But I was finally able to come today. Um, nice to meet you."

Maybe I was supposed to talk about my hobbies, or something I was good at, or my favorite actor or something like that. No, that was definitely the point where I should have thanked them for the flowers while I was in the hospital. But while I was stewing these options over—

"All right then. Class—"

Mr. Kubodera picked up where I'd dropped off.

"Starting today, I want you to be nice to Sakakibara and treat him as a new member of Class 3. I'm sure there are a lot of things he's not used to yet, so I want all of you to help him learn. We'll all pitch in to help each other and make this last year of middle school a good one. All of us are going to do our parts. So that next year in March every person in this class will graduate in good health…"

Thus went Mr. Kubodera's speech, which sounded as if we were supposed to recite an "Amen" at the conclusion. As I listened, a nagging itch started up on my back, but every person in the room

was listening pretty intently to what he was saying.

Just then, I saw a face I recognized in the very first row of seats. It was one of the class representatives who'd come to visit me, Tomohiko Kazami.

When our eyes met, there was something awkward about the smile Kazami gave me. The memory of the *dampness* I'd felt when we shook hands in the hospital room came back to me, and unconsciously I buried my right hand in my pocket.

Where was the other one, Yukari Sakuragi? Just as the question occurred to me, Mr. Kubodera said, "Okay, Sakakibara, let's have you sit over there," and he pointed at a desk.

It was on the left-hand side from the lectern—the third desk from the back in the row farthest to the edge near the hallway was empty.

"Yes, sir," I replied with a quick bow, then headed to my designated seat. I dropped my bag next to my desk. As I was sitting down, I surveyed the room again from my new vantage point.

It was then that I was finally able to isolate her. The student at the desk all the way at the back of the row to the right of the lectern—next to the windows facing the schoolyard.

Looking out from the front of the classroom, the sunlight from the windows had created a strange backlighting right in that spot. That was another reason. *So that's why I didn't see her*, I thought. Though I'd moved to my new desk, there was no significant change in the backlighting, but even so, I could see that there was a desk there and someone was sitting at it.

Betraying the image the words imply, the “bright light” seemed somehow menacing to me; I’m not sure why or how. It swallowed up half the student’s body, so I could only make out the figure of the person sitting there as a shadow with an ill-defined outline. Darkness, lurking right in the middle of the light…that thought crossed my mind, too.

Entranced by simultaneous foreboding and hope, which were accompanied by a flash of slight pain, I blinked several times.

Each time, the shadow’s outline came more into focus and deepened. The amount of sunlight was fading slightly at last, and that helped, too, until finally the figure came into stark resolution.

It was *her*.

The girl with the eye patch whom I’d seen in the elevator at the hospital. The girl who had walked down the dimly lit hallway on the second basement level, her footsteps making no sound at all…

“…Mei.”

I whispered it so that no one could hear me.

“Mei Misaki.”

5

After a short homeroom period that lasted only ten minutes, Mr. Kubodera kept his place at the lectern and his assistant, Ms. Mikami, left the room. Mr. Kubodera stayed with us because the

first-period class was the subject he taught.

Language arts with Mr. Kubodera was a dull class, as I had somehow imagined it would be. He was still using his polite manner of speaking, and he lectured in a way that was easy to process, but there wasn't much punch in it, I guess, or he hardly modulated his voice at all…Whatever, it was dull.

But of course, I couldn't be honest and display my boredom. That would make a terrible impression, obviously. On the teacher and probably on the students, too.

Struggling against the drowsiness that had me in its grip, I fixed my eyes on my brand-new textbook.

A short story by a nineteenth-century literary genius, in a somehow lackluster excerpt. As my eyes ran over the text, my mind was half on the Stephen King novel I'd started reading, wondering how everything would turn out, though that was impossible to predict. Man, what was going to happen to Paul Sheldon, the popular author who'd been imprisoned by his loony Number One Fan?

That was Mr. Kubodera's class. But the classroom was oddly quiet, which wasn't like the vague image I had drawn in my mind of a "public middle school." Maybe it had been an unwarranted preconceived bias, but—how should I put it? I imagined the atmosphere would be rowdier.

But it wasn't as if everyone was being serious and concentrating, either. No one was whispering during the class, but looking around I saw people zoning out and some people whose heads were bobbing

and bobbing and maybe falling. There were even people who were surreptitiously reading a magazine or intent on doodling. I didn't think Mr. Kubodera was the kind of teacher who would scold for every little thing…and yet.

I wonder what it was.

The room's air held a silence deeper than it needed to be, somehow…No, not silence. Formality, maybe? Formality, and a strange tension…yeah, it felt sort of like that.

What was this?

Could it be? I wondered.

Could the presence of an alien element mixed in today (in other words, a transfer student from Tokyo) be the cause? And that slight tension filling the room…Nah, that kind of thinking is just hyperactive self-consciousness.

…What about that girl?

Mei Misaki.

The thought nagged at me suddenly, and I looked over at her desk.

I saw her there, cheek pressed into her hand as she stared dully out the window. I took the quickest of glances, so I couldn't tell anything more than that. With the amount of backlighting from the sun, my glimpse of her was, in the end, of a shadow that hardly seemed real.

The impression was more or less the same in my other classes from second period on, too. There were slight differences with the subject or the teacher, but—how should I put it?—the thing flowing underneath it all was the same.

A strange silence permeating the entire classroom, a formality, a tension…Yes, it was something like that.

I couldn't tell anything concrete, couldn't point to someone acting a certain way. But I definitely felt something like that.

As if someone (or maybe everyone?) *was preoccupied by something*, for instance. Maybe without even realizing it? That person (those people?) could be thinking about something and not even be aware of it…But no. The possibility that I was just imagining things, imagining all of it, was undeniable. I mean, maybe I would get used to it soon and stop noticing anything.

During a break between classes, a couple of students exchanged a few words with me. Every time they called my name —"Sakakibara!"—even as I privately cringed and prepared myself, I managed to handle it either placidly, amicably, or innocuously, at a basic level. So I thought.

"Are you over whatever it is that put you in the hospital?"

Yeah. Completely over it.

"Which is better, Tokyo or here?"

I dunno. They're not that different, really.

"Tokyo sure is nice, though. A backwater town like Yomiyama

just doesn't cut it lately, y'know?"

Tokyo is Tokyo. There's a lot about it that's not so great. Wherever you go, it's nothing but people, and the wards are always swarmed. It never settles down…

"I guess you feel like that when you live there."

I almost think it's better here because it's so much quieter. And there's so much nature here.

When I told them that Yomiyama is better than Tokyo, half of me really felt that way and the other half was trying to convince myself of it.

"So your dad's a college professor? And he's in some foreign country for research?"

How did you know that?

"Mr. Kubodera told us. So everyone knows."

Oh. Did he tell you about the school I used to go to, too?

"We know all about that. It was Ms. Mikami's idea to send you flowers while you were in the hospital."

Really?

"Man, I wish Ms. Mikami was in charge of this class instead. She's gorgeous, and she dresses great, and plus…c'mon, don't you think so?"

Uh-h-m, I don't really know.

"C'mon, you're not…"

You know, my dad's gonna be in India for a year. Starting this spring.

"India? I bet you it's even hotter there."

Yeah, it's really hot, he said.

In the midst of such conversations, something would nag at me and I would search for Mei Misaki. As it turned out, as soon as a class ended, she would disappear from her seat. But I never spotted her anywhere else inside the classroom, either. Did she just always go outside during the break or something?

"You feeling nervous about something? You keep going all shifty-eyed."

No…it's nothing.

"Did those notes I brought you in the hospital help?"

Oh, yeah. They were great.

"You want a quick tour around the school during lunch? You're gonna have a ton of problems if you don't know where stuff is."

The student who made this offer was a boy named Teshigawara. There was a rule that the students wear name tags during school, so I could tell people's names at a glance without needing introductions. He seemed to be good friends with Tomohiko Kazami, and Teshigawara had come over with him to talk to me.

"Yeah, definitely. Thanks," I replied, then glanced casually back over at Mei Misaki's desk. The next class was going to be starting soon, but she still wasn't there. Although…

It was at this point that I realized a bizarre fact.

Her desk, the farthest seat back in the row next to the windows facing the schoolyard, was the only one unlike all the other desks in the room. It was incredibly old.

7

I blunted my hunger in a quick blitz at lunchtime.

There were a lot of all-boy groups and all-girl groups who pushed their desks together for lunch, but I couldn't quite work myself up to shoving my way in among them, so I bolted down the lunch my grandmother had given me with the speed of an eating contest.

When I stopped to think about it, I realized this was my first time ever eating a homemade lunch at school. I'd eaten school lunches at my old school, and even when there was some event like a field trip or field day, it had been a foregone conclusion that my lunch would be bought from a convenience store. It was like that all through elementary school, too. Never once had my dad gotten the genius idea that it would be nice to cook something for his motherless son every now and then.

And so it was that my grandmother's homemade lunch *truly* touched me.

Thank you, Grandma. It tasted amazing. As always, I was mentally bowing my head over the emptied lunch box, infusing the gesture with my immense gratitude.

Wait a minute. I looked around the room.

Where was Mei Misaki?

How was she spending her lunch?

"Sakakibara!"

A voice called out from behind me without warning.

At the same moment, someone tapped me lightly on the shoulder and I tensed more defensively than I had all that day. For no concrete reason, I had convinced myself, *So it's finally happening?* and I turned around **ready for it**, but…

Teshigawara was standing there. Kazami was beside him. And there was no discernible malice on their faces. Late though I was to realize it, I couldn't help feeling exasperated at my oversensitivity.

"Like we promised," Teshigawara said. "The tour of the school."

"Oh, that's right."

My true feelings on the matter, kind of cynically, were that they didn't need to go to all the trouble of giving me a tour. I could just ask where something was whenever I needed to get there. But, okay, I couldn't insult the kindness of my new classmates. This is the time to keep a lid on it and not act like a martyr…

The three of us all stood up and left the room belonging to third-year Class 3.

Kazami and Teshigawara were, even at a glance, an odd combo.

In contrast to the dead-serious class representative-y Kazami, Teshigawara was a lighthearted character, though the last name he bore sounded very grand and historical. His hair was bleached brown and the top two or three buttons of his uniform were undone. But despite his outward appearance, surprisingly he didn't have a delinquent slouch.

When I asked, they told me they had been in the same class since their third year in elementary school. Their families also lived really close to each other.

"When we were kids, we hung out and would get into all kinds of trouble. But then this punk had to go and turn all honor-roll-esque and never just wing it with something…"

Teshigawara was grinning all through this disparagement, but Kazami didn't offer any particular protest. Teshigawara even said they'd be better off without each other, but seriously, doesn't that sentiment usually go in the opposite direction? So the conversation went until I found myself starting to enjoy it, too.

I've never been very good at dealing with people like Teshigawara, who come at you as if you've been friends your whole life. Though it's not as if I felt a driving affinity for "honor-roll-esque" guys like Kazami, either. But, well, I had decided not to reveal those preferences if I could help it.

When my dad came back to Japan next spring, I would go right back to Tokyo. Until then, I wanted to maintain good relations with everyone at this school if I could. That was my top priority for my

life in Yomiyama.

“Hey, Sakakibara, d’you believe in ghosts or curses or whatever? Is that your thing?”

Out of the blue, he came at me with a question like that. I tipped my head to one side and replied, “Uh…?”

“Come on, like, you know…”

“You mean…ghosts? Curses?”

“What about so-called paranormal phenomena, generally?” Kazami cut in. “I don’t just mean spectral phenomena, either. It could be UFOs or superpowers or the predictions of Nostradamus, too. Do you think there are real, mysterious phenomena out there that can’t be explained by modern science?”

“I mean, when you hit me with a question like that, I…”

I looked over at Kazami, and his expression was uncomfortably serious.

“I guess, at a basic level, I try not to take stuff like that seriously.”

“None of it? Ever?”

“Well, let me think. Stuff that’s on a level with ‘the Seven Mysteries of the school,’ at least, I’d say never.”

I had no idea how the conversation had made this sudden turn, but I had a strong feeling they were gearing up to tell me those stories. I thought I’d called it and beat them to the punch.

“I’ve already heard the story about the mass demise of rabbits and

marmots.”

“Have you heard about ‘the hand in the lotus pond’?”

Teshigawara was the one to ask me that.

“Ha, you guys have a story like that, too, huh?”

“It’s that pond right there, man.”

Teshigawara extended a hand and pointed. A slight distance away I could see a small, square pond circled by concrete.

We came out of the three-story iron-ribbed school building that housed our classroom and walked down a path in the courtyard.

There was a school building of a similar size on the other side of the yard, which was Building B.

The building we’d come out of was Building C. Each of the structures was connected to Building A—the main building, with the teachers’ offices and the principal’s office—by a covered walkway. Past that, right next door, was a building called the Special Classes Building. This building, also abbreviated as Building S, was, as its name implies, where the special classrooms like the home ec room and the music room were.

And the pond Teshigawara was pointing at was a slight distance from the yard. We went as far as the entrance to Building A, then walked down the path away from it.

“They say that a human hand comes out of that pond, all wrapped in lotus leaves. Sometimes covered in blood.”

Teshigawara told the story in a menacing voice, but all I could

think was, *How idiotic*. Besides, he said it was a lotus pond, but when we got closer and I could see, it looked as if it was actually water lilies growing there, not lotuses.

"Well, let's leave the 'Seven Mysteries' for another time," Kazami offered. "I wonder, Sakakibara. There are so many kinds of paranormal phenomena. Do you categorically deny them all?"

"Well, that's true," I murmured, casting a sidelong glance at the surface of the pond, covered in round lily leaves. "The word UFO means an 'unidentified flying object,' so in that sense they exist. Whether or not they're flying saucers driven by aliens is a separate issue. As for superpowers, those people they show you on TV or in magazines are phonies, one hundred percent. When you see stuff like that, don't you think that actually makes it harder to believe?"

Kazami and Teshigawara looked at each other, both wearing troubled expressions.

"Nostradamus's predictions about what 'the prince of darkness' may or may not do is a story for next year. If we just wait a year and a couple more months, we should find out if he's for real or not, even if we don't want to…So? Do you guys think he'll be right?"

When I asked the question, Kazami cocked his head ambiguously. "Who knows?"

On the other hand, Teshigawara replied, "I pretty much buy it, actually," and twisted one corner of his mouth in a contrived smirk. "So since the world is gonna end in the summer of 1999, it'd be stupid to get myself all worked up over tests and whatever. Doing what I enjoy while I still can, that's the way to go."

I was having trouble telling exactly how serious he was, but what with all the fuss over the Aum Shinrikyo group, our generation had a surprisingly large number of "true believers" in this event. I'd seen data about that somewhere.

They're not giving it any deep thought; they're just using a prediction about destruction as a reason to avoid personal issues that are staring them in the face in the here and now. I don't remember when it was, but my dad had instantly pointed out this interpretation after hearing about the attack, and I pretty much agreed with him.

"Getting back on track…"

When we'd gone past the lily pond and were heading toward the back of Building B, Teshigawara spoke up.

"You don't believe in ghosts or curses or stuff like that then, do you?"

"Yeah, I guess not."

"Do you feel like something could happen that would make you believe?"

"I mean, if something like that popped up right in front of me, and it had proof that it was a ghost and shoved it in my face, I guess I'd start to believe in it."

"Heh. Proof, huh?"

"Proof, is it?"

That last was Kazami. He pushed the bridge of his silver-rimmed glasses back up his nose with a furrowed brow.

God, what now?

What were these two trying to get at? I was starting to get kind of a bad feeling about them after all and my pace quickened.

“What’s that?” I turned back around to look at them, pointing at a building that had come into view just then on the other side of Building B. “Is that another school building?”

“That’s Building Zero. That’s what everyone calls it,” Kazami answered.

“Building Zero?”

“Because it’s so old. Until about ten years ago, the third-year classes were in there. There are a lot of reasons they stopped using it, but…the number of students dropped, so the number of classes dropped, too. Apparently Building A and all the others got their names later on, so that’s why people call the old building Building Zero…”

That “old building” certainly did look older than any of the other buildings I’d seen on campus today.

It was a two-story structure of massive red bricks. But the bricks in its walls were incredibly faded and, after a closer look, I saw that cracks had formed in places. All the windows to the original classrooms that marched around the second floor were shut tight. In places, boards had been put up, probably to replace broken glass.

Given the turn of the conversation up till now, this struck me as a perfect spot to generate fodder for whispered rumors of the supernatural, about ghosts or spirits or the “Seven Mysteries.”

“So it’s not being used for anything now?” I asked, taking a careful step forward.

“Not as regular classrooms, anyway,” Kazami replied as he walked beside me. “The second floor is as good as abandoned, so no one’s allowed up there. The secondary library and art room are on the first floor, and the culture club.”

“You guys have a secondary library?”

“Hardly anyone uses it. Usually everyone goes to the main library in Building A. I’ve only ever been in there once.”

“What kind of books do they have there?”

“Documents about local history and antique books that alums have donated. It’s got a truly remarkable number of things like that, apparently. It’s more like a storage room for books than a library.”

“Huh.”

I wouldn’t mind taking a look at least once. My interest was piqued.

“This school has an art club, right?” I asked, having a sudden thought.

After a dragging delay, Kazami answered, “Yeah. Now we do.”

“‘Now you do’? What does that mean?”

“Extracurricular activities were suspended last year. They started up again in April.”

Teshigawara was the one who replied.

“Just FYI, the lovely Ms. Mikami is the sponsor. If I had any talent in that area, I’d be swearing how much I wanted in on the club, too. You gonna join or something, Sakakibara?”

I stopped walking and turned back to look at the bleached bobble-head, then shrugged my shoulders rather exaggeratedly. Teshigawara didn’t seem to take it badly, his eyes flashing with a grin.

“Hey, Sakakibara…”

I’d started walking again when Teshigawara spoke, as if trying to pull me back.

“There’s actually something we—”

But just then, I let out a surprised “Oh!” which served to interrupt whatever Teshigawara had been about to say. The sound had escaped me after an inadvertent tightening of my throat.

Magnificent flowerbeds had been set up in the yard between Building Zero and Building B, where we were headed. A few among them were resplendent with yellow roses in bloom. And just then, beyond the clusters of flowers bobbing in the placid spring breeze, I saw her—Mei Misaki.

Without a second to spare for thought, I started heading straight toward her.

“H-hey! Sakakibara!”

“What are you doing, Sakakibara?”

I heard the dismayed tone in Teshigawara’s and Kazami’s voices, but I ignored it. I hurried over, and even broke into a slight jog.

Mei Misaki—she was by herself, sitting on a bench in the shade of a tree on the far side of a flowerbed. There was no one else in sight.

"H-hey there," I called out to her.

She was staring into space, as if sunk in contemplation, but she reacted to my voice. Her eyes—though the white eye patch hid her left one—turned to me and halted.

"Hey."

I tried to act nonchalant and raised a hand casually.

"The name's Misaki, right?"

I walked up to the bench where she sat. My heart was beating faster than it had this morning when I spoke in front of the entire class. I felt as if my breathing was getting more strained, too.

"We're in the same class, huh? Third years, Class 3. I, uh, I transferred here today…"

"…Why?"

Her lips moved only slightly. The same tone of voice I'd heard in the elevator at the hospital, the same cool, detached way of talking.

"Why?" she repeated. "Are you sure about this?"

"Wha?"

I didn't understand her questions. *"Why?" "Are you sure about this?"* I didn't have the faintest idea what she was asking me in either case and could only stand there, shaken.

“Um-m-m, what I meant was…”

I scrambled for some way to keep the conversation going, but she turned her eyes from me and stood up from the bench in silence. That was when I got a clear look at the name tag hanging from her blazer.

It was a light purple card, indicating that she was a third-year. While I may have been imagining how very dirty and beat-up the paper looked, her name was written there quite clearly: “Misaki,” viewing the cliffs…Mei “Misaki.”

My mouth flopped, fishlike. I tried to tell her, “I saw you at the hospital the other day,” but the words wouldn’t come together. I was still trying when she said simply, “You should be careful.”

Then she quietly turned her back to me.

“W-wait,” I called out in a rush to try and stop her, but she kept her back to me.

“You…should be careful. It might have started already.”

Then Mei Misaki left me, as I stood rooted half in shock, and departed the shadow of the tree where the bench stood.

I watched her go.

She moved toward the entrance to Building Zero, then disappeared inside the aging building. As if melting away in the lingering gloom…

The bell announcing the end of lunch began to peal, releasing the frozen moment. I looked around me, feeling as if I had been jerked

back to my senses.

"Hey! What're you doing, Sakakibara?"

Teshigawara's shout reached me.

"We've got gym next. The locker room is next to the gymnasium. We better hurry if we're gonna be on time."

When I turned around, Teshigawara's lips were pursed so far out he might have been whistling. Beside him, Kazami was shaking his head incessantly over something, his face pale and bowed.

9

Gym class was divided into boys and girls.

I was sitting on a bench in the shade of a tree on the north side of the field, still in my uniform. I still wasn't allowed to do vigorous exercise, according to the doctor's instructions. So, as I'd told Teshigawara, there wasn't any particular need for me to hurry over.

I was the only boy sitting out of the class.

Everyone wore matching white exercise clothes and ran around the 400-meter track. Despite the balminess of the afternoon sunlight, only ten or so figures moved about on the broad field. A slightly cold sensation went through me, for some reason, as I watched the scene.

When I ran, I liked to do long distances and short distances. I liked using exercise machines and swimming, too. What I didn't like

was soccer, or basketball…basically, I'm terrible at team sports.

I wish I could run, I thought. I tried taking a few deep breaths, and I didn't feel anything strange in my chest. Which just made me want to join in even more.

And yet, there was a part of me that cringed in terror. That felt as though, if I were to run and jump around recklessly, a hole would immediately open up again somewhere in my lungs.

"You're not going to have a third one." That's what my dad had told me, but that wasn't nearly convincing enough for me to take seriously. If I was stupid and pushed myself too far, I would have to go through all those horrible feelings again, and I was done with that. What I had to do now was take it easy for a while. That was my only option.

The girls were doing long jumps in a sandlot on the western side of the field.

I thought I would see her among them—Mei Misaki. I squinted my eyes to look, but they were pretty far away and I couldn't really make anyone out.

Considering she had an eye patch over her left eye, maybe she was sitting out. In which case, she'd be on one of the benches nearby…

I spotted a person who might have been her.

Standing all alone a short distance from the sandlot in the shade of a tree, wearing a uniform—was that her?

Because of the distance, I couldn't tell if it was Mei or not.

And I couldn't exactly stare at the girls all class long. A sigh escaped me as I laced my fingers behind my head and reclined into them. I squeezed my eyes shut and, all at once, I heard the shrill voice of Ray the mynah bird asking *"Why?"* ringing in my ears.

I guess it was about five or six minutes after that.

"Um, Sakakibara?"

Someone was talking to me.

Surprised, my eyes opened. Just three feet away, I saw a girl in a navy blazer.

It wasn't Mei Misaki, though.

She wore not an eye patch, but silver-rimmed glasses. Her hair was cut not in a short bob, but grew to her shoulders. It was Yukari Sakuragi, the class representative.

"Are you sitting out of gym for now?"

Taking care that she wouldn't notice the slight disappointment I was feeling inside, I replied, "Yeah. It's only been a week since I got out of the hospital and all. The doctor told me to hold off on exercising and see how I feel. Are you sitting out, too? Do you feel sick today?"

"I fell yesterday and twisted my leg."

Yukari Sakuragi dropped her eyes to her leg. That was when I noticed the painful-looking bandage wrapped around her right leg from the top of her knee down to her shin.

"Um…you didn't happen to fall on the hill outside the back gate,

did you?”

I asked it half as a joke. When I said it, Sakuragi smiled, as if letting go of some kind of tension.

“Luckily it happened somewhere else. You already know about that jinx, huh?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“So then—” she began, but I ignored it and seized the chance to cut in.

“I wanted to thank you for coming to the hospital the other day.”

“Oh…we were happy to do it.”

“Do you want to sit down?”

I stood up, offering the bench to the injured girl. Then I changed the subject.

“Can you tell me why there aren’t two class groups in this gym period?”

I’d been wondering about that for a little while.

“I thought it was normal for a class split up into boys and girls like this to join up with the class next door? Especially in public school? Plus, there are two teachers for the boys and the girls, so with just the one class, there’s half as many students as there should be…”

At least with this few people, we wouldn’t be able to have a soccer game in class. Not that I could care less about that missed

opportunity.

“The other classes are different,” Sakuragi answered. “Class 1 and Class 2 have gym together, and Class 4 and Class 5 have gym together. Class 3 is the only one by itself.”

“Why Class 3?”

I could understand since there were an odd number of classes in third year, but then why was Class 3 the one by itself? Wouldn’t Class 5 usually be the odd one out?

“You were with Kazami and Teshigawara during lunch, right?”

This time, she was the one to change the subject.

“Yeah, I was. What about it?”

Still sitting on the bench, she cocked her head and looked up at me. “Well, did they…tell you anything?”

“Kazami and Teshigawara?”

“Yeah.”

“They gave me a quick tour of the school. Basically, hey, that’s Building A, behind that is Building S where the special classes are—like that. They told me the ghost story about the lotus pond, too.”

“That’s all?”

“We went to Building Zero last, so they told me a little about what the old school building’s for.”

“And that’s all?”

“Pretty much, I think, yeah.”

"…Oh." Yukari Sakuragi bowed her head with a quiet whisper, then lowered her voice even more. "…I have to do this right, or Akazawa's going to get mad at me…"

I caught only snatches of what she was murmuring to herself. Akazawa? Wasn't "Akazawa" one of the students who didn't come to school today?

Sakuragi slowly got up from the bench, wearing a pensive expression. I could clearly see how her movements accommodated the injury to her right leg.

"So, Sakuragi—"

I decided to just try asking her.

"I mean, where's Misaki?"

"…What?"

She tilted her head to one side.

"The girl in our class, Mei Misaki. You know, with the patch over her left eye. Is she sitting out of gym class, too?"

Sakuragi kept cocking her head and repeating "What? What?" She looked completely baffled, for some reason. Why? What was making her react so bizarrely?

"I ran into her outside Building Zero during lunch."

Just then, far off in the distance, we heard a deep, reverberating *rrrmmmble*. Was a plane taking off? No, it didn't sound like that. Could it be thunder?

I craned my head back to look at the sky.

From what I could see here in the shade of the tree, it was the same, clear May day it had been before. So I thought, but when I scanned around, I saw that ominous clouds were gathering slightly to the north. So it really was thunder from over there that we'd heard?

As the thought occurred to me, the same *rmrmbmrmmmble* sound came again from far off.

So it is that. Distant spring thunder.

Must be in for a little rain after sunset.

I ventured this prediction to myself, casting my eyes over the northern sky.

"Huh?"

I spotted **something** in a place I hadn't expected, and the question slipped out of me.

"What's someone doing up there?"

Building C, the three-story school building that stood on the north side of the field. There, on the roof—

Someone was standing just inside the railing that circled the roof. Was that—?

It was her. Mei Misaki.

The realization came suddenly. Even though there was no way I could have clearly seen her face, or even her clothes.

And in the next moment I had left Yukari Sakuragi behind, still

wearing her perplexed expression, and started running toward Building C.

10

While I was running up the stairs, the shortness of breath finally hit me. The X-ray image of my collapsed lung flickered through my mind, but I was more focused on the figure I'd seen from the field.

I found the door to the roof easily.

It was a cream-colored steel door. A cardboard sign was taped to the door, which read NO UNNECESSARY ACCESS in red ink.

I decided in less than a second to ignore such an inexplicably ambiguous prohibition. The door wasn't locked. I pushed it open and burst outside.

My instinct had been right. The identity of the figure was, indeed, Mei Misaki.

On the roof of the iron-ribbed school building, a grimy concrete wasteland. Alone in the center of it all—

She stood right against the railing that faced the field. She was facing this way, so she must have noticed me right away. But without a word, she spun her back on me.

Bringing my ragged breathing under control, I walked over to stand beside her.

"Hey…Misaki…" I called weakly to her. "Uh…so you're sitting

out of gym class, too, huh?"

…No response.

I closed the distance one step, then two. "Is this okay? I mean, are you allowed to be up here?"

Her back was still turned when a voice came back to me, "So? Watching up close hardly has more meaning."

"The teachers aren't going to yell at you?"

"…Doubt it."

Her reply was a whisper as she finally turned around to face me. I saw then that she was holding an octavo-sized sketchbook tightly against her chest.

"You're up here, too."

She turned the question back on me.

"So?" I said, copying her earlier response. "It's true there's not much point in just watching gym classes. Do you draw?"

Without answering, she hid the sketchbook behind her.

"I mentioned this when I ran into you at lunch but, um…I transferred today, into Class 3…"

"You're Sakakibara."

"Uh, yeah. And you're Misaki, right? Mei Misaki?" I glanced down at the name tag pinned to her chest. "How do you write Mei?"

"Same way you write 'howl.'"

“Howl?”

“Or ‘sound.’ Like in ‘resonance.’ Or ‘scream.’”

Howl, huh? Howling on a cliff…

“Um, do you remember? We met at the municipal hospital recently.”

I was finally able to ask her the question, but my heart was still utterly unable to find an even beat—basically, it was halfway to overdrive. *Thmp…thmp*…I could hear the beats strong in my ears.

“It was Monday last week. I happened to get on the same elevator as you in the inpatient ward, then you got off at the second basement level. You told me your name when I asked you. You don’t remember?”

“Last week, Monday…” Mei Misaki murmured, her right eye, not hidden by the patch, slowly closing. “That…might have happened.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s been on my mind…ever since. Then when you were in class today, I was shocked.”

“Oh.”

It was a curt reply, but her small, thin lips looked as though they held the phantom of a smile.

“Why were you going to the second basement level that day?” I pressed. “You said you were dropping something off or something like that, right? For who? You were carrying a white doll, it looked like. Was that what you were dropping off?”

“I hate the way you’re interrogating me.”

She spoke in the same curt voice and turned her eyes away.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I apologized quickly. "I wasn't trying to force you to answer or anything. It's just…"

"Something sad happened that day."

Half my body is waiting there, the poor thing.

Hadn't she said something like that in the elevator that day?

Half my body…the poor thing.

It had been weighing on my mind, but obviously I wouldn't be able to ask her anything else. And she wasn't sharing anything more.

The distant thunder rolled again. The wind blowing over the roof felt a touch colder than before.

"You…"

I heard Mei Misaki's voice.

"Your name is Koichi Sakakibara. Is that right?"

"Uh, yeah."

"That must bother you."

"Th—…What?"

Hold on a second. Was she about to bring **that** up? Now?

"Wh-why do you say that?"

I hurried to regain my composure. Mei fixed me with a silent look.

“I mean, wasn’t it around this time last year? The whole country was panicking. It hasn’t even been a year since it happened.”

I didn’t answer.

“Sakakibara. It’s a good thing you’re not named Seito.”

When she said that, another whisper of a smile crossed her lips.

I was really in for it.

It had been so long since anyone had alluded to that—and it hadn’t happened *yet* at school today. And now, of all things, to hear it from her—from the lips of Mei Misaki.

“What’s wrong?” Mei tilted her head curiously. “Did you not want me to mention that?”

I tried to reply “Who cares?” and look as if it didn’t bother me, but I really didn’t pull it off. Before I could even begin to think over what to do now—“It brings up bad memories.”

I had started confessing, straight-faced.

“At my old school, last year—when the attack in Kobe happened, and everyone started talking about Sakakibara Seito, another fourteen-year-old middle schooler got sucked in, too…”

“Did they bully you?”

“Nobody ever did anything serious enough to call it *bullying*, but…”

No…it hadn’t been anything that bad. There hadn’t been any intentional or underhanded malice in it at all. Everyone just kind of

thought it was funny…

They would write my name with the same characters he used, or call me Seito. Childish joking around that was harmless enough. But…

I let it roll off of me with an easy laugh in the heat of the moment, but sometimes I hated it more than I could stand, more than I even realized. In other words, the building blocks of stress. And then…

Last year in the fall, when I had been carrying the burden of this stress every day. That was when I had my first spontaneous pneumothorax. Maybe one of the reasons it happened goes back to all that stuff about Sakakibara. Remembering everything that happened, it doesn't seem like such a forced theory anymore.

And the reason I've been packed off to be taken in by my grandparents in Yomiyama while my dad is out of Japan for a year is because he found out about what was going on and had a rare moment of parental concern for me. He probably decided that it would be best if I could change up my daily environment and push the reset button on my interactions with the people at school, where things kept getting more and more strained.

Even after I'd told her the broad outlines of what had happened, Mei Misaki didn't backpedal and sympathize with me, or act embarrassed about what she'd done.

She asked, "Has anyone done it to you here yet?"

"You're the first," I answered with a bitter smile. Oddly, I had relaxed slightly.

All this morning, every time someone had spoken my name, I had tensed up, expecting this. And all for such a small thing. Ugh. When I put it all into words to tell her about it, it seemed stupid somehow.

"They're probably just being polite," Mei said.

"…Maybe."

"I find it hard to believe they'd be worried about your feelings."

"What do you mean?"

"Because Sakakibara is a name inextricably associated with death. And not just any death, at that: a cruel, senseless death that plays itself out at school."

"Associated with death…"

"Yeah."

Mei nodded quietly and held her hair down as the wind tossed it.

"That bothers everyone. So…maybe they're not aware of it. Like a wound they're protecting."

"…What does that mean?"

What was she talking about?

I understood that the word "death" and the concepts it implied were ominous and had always upset people. That was obvious. But…

"You know, at this school…" Mei's tone was as cool and detached as ever. "Here, third-year Class 3 is the closest to death of all the classes. More than any other class at any other school. Much

more.”

“Close to death? What does that…?”

I couldn’t process what she meant by that at all, and I pressed a hand to my forehead. Mei’s right eye, fixed on me, narrowed until it was only a slit.

“You don’t know anything, do you, Sakakibara?”

Then she spun back around to look at the field. She rested her chest against the brown railing and angled forward over it, then bent her head back. Standing behind her, I looked up at the sky, too. The cloud cover had increased substantially from earlier.

I could hear the distant thunder again. Frightened by the sound, crows were cawing, and I saw several pairs of coal-black wings beat their way into the sky from trees in the schoolyard.

“You don’t know, do you, Sakakibara?”

Still staring up the sky, Mei Misaki repeated herself.

“No one’s told you yet.”

“…Told me what?”

“You’ll find out soon.”

There was nothing I could say to that.

“Also, you’re better off not coming near me.”

When she said that, I understood even less.

“You should stop talking to me like this, too.”

“Why? Why can’t I?”

“I said you’ll find out soon.”

“Come on…”

That didn’t really help. In fact, it didn’t help at all.

While I was searching for something to say, not sure how to respond to that, Mei Misaki turned her body in silence. Hugging the sketchbook to her chest, she passed by me and headed for the door.

“I’ll see you, *Sa-ka-ki-ba-ra*.”

My body froze instantly, as if she’d cast some repugnant spell on me. But I shook it off quickly and went after her. As I did, another crow cawed in the schoolyard.

One of the “fundamentals” Reiko had told me the night before came to mind all on its own.

If you hear the cawing of a crow when you leave the roof, you go back inside by…

Was it the right leg? Or the left leg?

Which one was it? *Pretty sure it’s the left leg*... As I worked through all this, Mei briskly opened the door and disappeared beyond it.

She’d gone in with her right foot.

The rain finally started to fall after the end of sixth period. It was a hard rain, like a sudden evening shower out of season.

As I was getting my things together to go home, worrying about not having an umbrella, my cell phone started to vibrate inside my bag. I had set it on silent. It was a call from my grandmother.

"I'm leaving right now to come get you. I want you to wait for me at the front gate."

It was a welcome message, but my reply was instantly "It's okay, Grandma. It'll probably just be sprinkling by the time you get here."

"That's no way for a recovering boy to talk. And what if you got soaked and caught a cold?"

"But…"

"No buts, Koichi. All right? You wait until I get there."

She hung up then, and I looked around me blankly and sighed.

"Hey, Sakakibara! You've got a cell phone, huh?"

Right then, someone spoke to me. It was Teshigawara. He rummaged in the inside pocket of his uniform and then pulled out a white phone with a flashy strap tied to it.

"We'll be phone buddies. What's your number?"

It was still a small selection of middle school students who had their own cell phones. Even at schools in Tokyo, they were about as common as PHS phones. Maybe one in three kids at the most.

As we traded numbers, I glanced over at the bank of windows.

There, all the way at the back, Mei Misaki had already gone.

I waited till Teshigawara put his phone back in his pocket, then said, “You mind if I ask you something?”

“Hm?”

“About that girl Misaki who sits at that desk.”

“Hm-m-m?”

“She’s pretty weird. What’s her deal?”

“You feeling all right, Sakakibara?”

Teshigawara angled his head with an expression that looked completely serious.

“Get it together, man.”

He slapped me on the back heavily and then quickly departed the scene.

I left the classroom and, as I was heading toward Building A and the front gate, I ran into Ms. Mikami, the assistant teacher, in the hall.

“How did it go today, Sakakibara? What do you think of your new school?”

Her questions came with a natural smile. Utterly discombobulated, I replied, “Uh, I think I’ll manage.”

Ms. Mikami nodded mechanically. “Do you have an umbrella? It’s raining.”

“Um, Grandma’s—I mean, my grandmother said she’s coming to

get me with the car. She called me on my cell phone a minute ago."

"You'll be all right, then. Take care."

It was only fifteen minutes later that my grandmother's black Cedric pulled up to the driveway by the entrance, coming through the rain, the ferocity of which had slackened somewhat.

There were a couple of students near the entrance who hadn't been able to leave yet because of the unexpected rain. I quickly climbed into the passenger seat of the car, as if fleeing from their looks.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Koichi," my grandmother greeted me, adjusting her hands on the wheel. "You don't feel any worse, do you?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine."

"Do you think you'll get along with your classmates?"

"I guess…"

We drove away from the school building and headed slowly over the slick road to the front gate. And on our way out—

I was leaning against the door, gazing outside, when my eyes fell on *her*. The rain had slacked off a lot, but it was still more than a drizzle, and she was walking through it without an umbrella, alone.

Mei Misaki.

"What's wrong?" my grandmother asked, just before pulling the car onto the road outside. Something in my reaction must have tipped her off. I hadn't even made a noise or opened the window or

anything.

"…Nothing. Don't worry about it," I answered, then twisted my body around to look back. And yet…

Mei was already gone. As if she had melted away into the falling rain. That's how it seemed to me that day.

Chapter 3

May II

1

“What’s this?”

I heard Ms. Mikami’s voice. She had posed the question to a boy to my left named Mochizuki. Yuya Mochizuki.

He was on the small side, pale, and though plain, he was fine-featured. If he really went for it and walked around Shibuya dressed in drag, he could get mistaken for a pretty young thing and get picked up by someone. However, I had yet to speak a word to him since transferring in yesterday. I tried to say hi, but he would instantly look away from me. It was hard to tell if he was just shy or if he had a dark, misanthropic personality.

Ms. Mikami’s question caused Mochizuki’s cheeks to flush slightly, and he fumbled for a response. “Um…I was trying to make a lemon…”

“A lemon? This?”

Darting a glance up at the teacher, who was twisting her head to weird angles, Mochizuki replied in a low voice, “Yes. It’s the scream in a lemon.”

It was Thursday, my second day at school. We were in fifth period, art class.

The class, on the first floor of that old school building—Building Zero—was split into six groups, each sitting around their own large

worktables. A variety of objects were lined up at the center of each table, like an onion, a lemon, a mug, and so on. The purpose of today's class was to sketch a still life of these things.

I'd selected a mug set beside an onion and begun drawing in pencil on the drawing paper we'd been given. Apparently Mochizuki had chosen a lemon, but I dunno…

Craning my neck, I snuck a look at the paper in front of him. I got a glimpse of it and—

Yeah, I get it now. There was plenty of reason for Ms. Mikami to be asking questions.

He had drawn some grotesque *thing*, shaped nothing like any of the subjects on the table.

When he said it was a lemon, okay, I could just barely make it out. But it was more than twice as stretched out as the lemon in front of me, tall and spindly, plus the outline was all wavy in uneven bumps. On top of that, he'd drawn the same kind of wavy, bumpy lines (they looked like special-effect lines to me) all around it…

What *was* this?

Suddenly, I had the same thought. But then if I extrapolated from "the scream in a lemon" like Mochizuki had said, I realized, *It could be*…

When you hear the word "scream," even a grade school kid knows —that greatest masterpiece by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. The figure of a man on a bridge covering his ears, drawn with a bizarre composition and palette in fluctuating lines. This wobbly

drawing of a lemon seemed to share something with that painting…

"Do you think this is acceptable, Mochizuki?"

Stealing another glance up at her, Mochizuki hesitantly replied, "Yes…I mean, this is how the lemon looks to me right now…"

"I see."

Ms. Mikami drew her lips tight and harrumphed. "It isn't really in the spirit of today's class, but…I suppose it's all right." A rueful smile edged onto her face, as if she had thrown her hands up in defeat, and she said, "I'd prefer it if you only experiment like this in art club, however."

"Oh. Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"There's no need to apologize. Go ahead and finish this up the way you have it."

With that indifferent admonition, Ms. Mikami moved away from us. Then—

"Do you like Munch?"

I peeked again at Mochizuki's drawing and gingerly tried to engage him.

"Uh…yeah, I guess," he replied without looking at me and then picked up his pencil again. But I didn't sense a strong blockade being thrown up, so I pressed on.

"But why did the lemon come out like that?"

He pinched his lips together and harrumphed like Ms. Mikami

had just done.

"That's how I see it, so that's how I drew it. That's all."

"You mean objects have screams, too?"

"That's not what's going on. People misinterpret Munch's painting all the time. It isn't the man that's screaming in that painting. It's the world around him. The scream is making him shudder, so he's covering his ears."

"So then it's not the lemon screaming, either."

"Right."

"Is the lemon covering its ears?"

"I don't think you're getting it yet…"

"Hm-m-m. Well, whatever. So you're in the art club?"

"Oh—yeah. I rejoined in third year."

Which reminded me of what Teshigawara had told me yesterday, about the art club being suspended last year. But starting in April this year, the "lovely Ms. Mikami" had become the sponsor…

"What about you?"

Then, for the first time, Mochizuki looked at me. He cocked his head to one side like a puppy.

"Are you gonna join?"

"Wh-why would I do that?"

"Well…"

“Sure, I’m kind of interested in it…but I don’t know. I’m not that good at drawing.”

“It doesn’t really matter how good you are,” Mochizuki told me in an extremely serious tone. “You draw pictures by seeing with the eyes in your heart. That’s what makes it fun.”

“The eyes in your heart?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what this is?”

I glanced at his “scream in lemon,” and Mochizuki nodded saying, “Sure,” without a hint of guilt, rubbing a finger under his nose.

I guess he was petrified of strangers; still, once I started talking to him, he seemed pretty interesting. That thought helped me relax a lot, but at the same time—

Something flashed through my mind at the mention of the art club.

When we’d talked on the roof of Building C during gym class yesterday, she—Mei Misaki—had carried a sketchbook. Could she be in the art club, too?

The art room in Building Zero was twice as big as a normal classroom. The construction and equipment in the room was getting old, and the amount of light it got left the place somehow dreary, but thanks to the high ceiling, the room didn’t feel too oppressive. It made it feel even bigger than it already was.

My eyes wandered around the room, as if for the first time. However—

I didn't see Mei Misaki anywhere, after all.

But she was in morning classes...I couldn't help feeling suspicious.

There hadn't been time for a leisurely chat, but I'd succeeded in catching her during one of the breaks between classes and shared a few words with her. I mentioned how she'd gone home alone in the rain yesterday, and other trifling things.

"I don't hate the rain."

That's what she'd told me then.

"My favorite is the cold rain in the middle of winter. The moment it changes to snow."

I wanted to catch her at lunch and talk some more, but just like yesterday, she had disappeared from the classroom before I'd noticed. And even now that fifth period had begun, she had yet to appear.

"Hey, Sakakibara."

Mochizuki was the one trying to start conversations now. I put my thoughts about Mei on hold. "What?"

"What do you think…about Ms. Mikami?"

"Out of the blue, I mean, I don't know."

"Oh, I see. Yeah, okay…" Mochizuki nodded several times,

murmuring in a low voice, and his cheeks tinted slightly red again.

What's with this guy? Secretly, he'd knocked me off balance a little.

Does he have a crush on his art teacher? This kid? How does that work? She's more than ten years older than you, dude.

2

"Munch made four copies of *The Scream* in all."

"I'd heard that."

"I like the one at the Oslo National Museum of Art. The red color of the sky is the most intimidating. It looks like blood is going to come pouring out of it any second."

"Huh. But doesn't that start to scare you, the more you look at it? Or make you feel incredibly uneasy? How can you like that?"

You could say it's an easy painting to understand. The visual impact is so intense, the underlying subject matter gets ignored and funny or interesting parodies are everywhere you look. So I suppose in that sense it's a popular work. But of course, when Mochizuki said he liked it, he didn't seem to be talking on that level.

"Uneasy…I suppose so. It's a picture that drags those feelings out for me, that there's anxiety in everything and that's just the way it is. That's why I like it."

"You like it because it makes you uneasy?"

“It’s not like it goes away if you pretend you don’t feel it. You’re the same way, aren’t you, Sakakibara? I’m positive it’s the same for everyone.”

“Even lemons and onions?”

I said it jokingly, and Mochizuki smiled a little shyly.

“Drawings are a projection of the imagination.”

“Sure, but come on…”

After art class ended, I wound up getting up and walking out with Yuya Mochizuki. And, as we wound up continuing our conversation, we walked down a dimly lit hall of Building Zero.

“Yo, Sakaki!”

Someone behind me tapped me on the shoulder. Before I even turned around, I knew it was Teshigawara. Apparently he’d decided to start abbreviating my name to “Sakaki” today.

“You guys whispering about Ms. Mikami? I want in.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but we’re talking about something a little bit darker than that,” I replied.

“What is it? What’re you talking about?”

“The anxiety that cloaks the world.”

“Wha-a-a?”

“Do you ever feel uneasy, Teshigawara?” I asked, despite my opinion that he seemed to lack any connection to emotions like that. It had already become natural to talk plainly to him.

The bleached goofball beat my expectations, though, when he said, “What do you think!”

He nodded grandly, I wasn’t sure exactly how seriously, and then replied, “After all, when I went up a grade, I wound up getting stuck with the ‘curse of Class 3’!”

“Wha?”

The sound slipped out of me. At the same time, I saw Mochizuki’s reaction: As his gaze fell silently to his feet, his expression seemed melancholy and somehow tense. The scene had crystallized in the space of a moment. That’s what it felt like.

“So-o-o, Sakaki,” Teshigawara said. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this since yesterday…”

“Hold on, Teshigawara,” Mochizuki spoke up. “I don’t think you can do that anymore.”

Can’t do that? Do what? Why not?

“‘Anymore’ is assuming we ever…”

This was Teshigawara, who was having trouble continuing. Totally in the dark, I cried, “What are you guys talking about?” then caught myself with a gasp.

We’d been walking down a hall in Building Zero and were just coming up on the secondary library. Hardly anyone seemed to use the old library, but now the sliding door leading into it was open a few centimeters. And through the gap, I could see into the room…

…*She was there.*

Mei Misaki was in there.

“What’s wrong?”

Teshigawara’s question was dubious.

“Hold on a second,” I replied ambiguously and slid the library door open. Mei turned to look at us.

Mei was sitting at a large desk in the totally empty room. I raised my hand to wave, “Hey,” but she gave no response whatsoever and returned her eyes to the desk.

“H-hey, Sakaki. You’re not really…”

“S-Sakakibara? What are you…?”

More or less ignoring Teshigawara and Mochizuki’s chatter, I stepped into the secondary library.

3

The walls were obscured behind bookshelves that went all the way to the ceiling, packed full of books. Even that wasn’t enough, though, and more than half the floor space in the room was a forest of tall shelves.

The room looked to be about the same size as the art classroom, but the style was completely different. There wasn’t even a hint of openness in here. The weight of all the books being stored here imparted a heavy oppressiveness to the room. The amount of light made this place seem all the gloomier, and looking around I saw that

several of the fluorescent lights were out.

There was only one large table intended for readers, where Mei sat. Not even ten chairs were placed around it. There was a small counter in a back corner to the left, in a valley between the shelves. I couldn't see anyone there right now, but I assumed that was where the librarian usually was.

In this space suffused with the unique smell of old books, where time seemed to have come to rest…that's where she was.

Mei Misaki was in here, all by herself.

Even as I approached, she never so much as glanced at me. Lying open before her on the desk was, not a book, but her large octavo sketchbook.

Had she…skipped art class to come here and draw by herself?

"Do you think you should have come in here?"

Mei spoke without shifting her gaze.

"Why not?" I retorted.

"Your two friends didn't stop you?"

"Guess not."

There was something strange in how everyone else in class acted when it came to her. Although I had started, ever so vaguely, to guess why that might be.

"What are you drawing?" I asked, dropping my eyes to her sketchbook.

It was a sketch of a beautiful young girl, done in pencil. It didn't have the style of an anime or manga drawing. It was a more realistic, naturalistic line drawing.

The body shape was delicate, its sex barely distinguishable. The limbs were slender. The hair long. The eyes, nose, and mouth hadn't been drawn in yet, but still it conveyed the image of a beautiful young girl.

"Is this…a doll?"

I had a reason for asking that.

The shoulders, elbows, wrists, hip joints, knees, and ankles…at each of these joints, I could see in the drawing the characteristic form that certain types of dolls have: the signature structure in what's called a "ball-jointed doll," shaped exactly as the name implies.

Without answering, Mei disinterestedly dropped the pencil she'd been holding on top of the drawing.

"Do you have a model? Or is it all from your imagination?"

I piled up the questions even as I prepared to hear *I hate the way you're interrogating me.* Finally, Mei turned her face toward me.

"I can't say which it is. Maybe both."

"Both?"

"I'm going to give this girl huge wings, last of all."

"Wings…So she's an angel?"

“I dunno. Could be.”

It could be a devil—a comment like that seemed ready to follow, and my breath caught for a second. But Mei didn’t elaborate. A faint smile was all that touched her lips.

“What happened to your eye?”

I tried changing the subject, to something I had been wondering this whole time.

“You’ve had that on since I saw you at the hospital. Did you get hurt?”

“You want to know?”

Mei tilted her head slightly, her right eye narrowing. Flustered, I told her, “Uh, if you don’t want, that’s okay…”

“Then I won’t tell you.”

Just then the crackling sound of a bell started up somewhere in the room. Apparently the battered old speaker was still being used, despite never being repaired.

It was the bell to start sixth period, but Mei made no move to stand up. Maybe she was going to cut again.

Should I leave her, or drag her with me? I was having trouble deciding.

“You should get to class.”

A voice came out of nowhere.

It was a male voice I had never heard before. There was a slight

rasp to it, but it was deep and rich.

Startled, I looked around the room and discovered where it had come from.

Behind that counter in the corner of the room, where I had seen no one before, was a man dressed all in black.

"I haven't seen you before," the man said. He had frumpy black-rimmed glasses and a lot of white mixed into his strawlike hair.

"Um, I'm Sakakibara, in third-year Class 3. I just transferred to this school yesterday, and uh…"

"I'm Chibiki, the librarian." He fixed his eyes on me, unwavering, as he spoke. "You can come here anytime you like, but for now: go on, get along."

4

Sixth period was an extended homeroom, which we had once a week. If this were elementary school, it would be our class meeting time, but I doubted such lively and unrestricted discussions would be taking place while the head teacher was watching over us. Nowadays, public and private schools are probably both the same way.

There weren't any problems that called for discussion right then, so we wound up being dismissed from class before school was over.

Mei Misaki never appeared in the classroom during this time,

either. But it seemed to me that no one showed any sign of worrying particularly about it, including Mr. Kubodera and Ms. Mikami.

My grandmother had brought me to school in the car again today. I'd tried to stop her, telling her she didn't have to do this, but she wouldn't let it go. "This week, I have to," she told me. And considering my position, I couldn't really put up a whole lot of resistance, either…

To be honest, I wanted to stay at school a little longer and look for Mei, but I had to give it up. I declined an invitation from Teshigawara and the others to go home with them, too, and climbed into the car that had come to get me.

5

After dinner that night, before Reiko retreated to her office/bedroom in the side house, I had a chance to talk with her alone for a little while.

I'd saved up a bunch of stuff to ask her, but now that we were actually talking, I tensed up for some reason—as usual. We wound up talking about a bunch of fluff subjects, which wasn't what I'd meant to do at all.

After much hesitation and waffling, I tried just jumping in headlong by leading with a question about the secondary library in Building Zero.

"Has that library always been there?"

“Yup. Obviously it was there when I was in middle school, and I’m pretty sure it was there when Ritsuko went there, too.”

“Was it the ‘secondary’ library back then?”

“No, that’s changed. It must have become the ‘secondary’ library after the new buildings were finished and the new library was ready.”

“Probably.”

Reiko had been propping her chin up on one hand, resting her elbow on the table. She switched arms and took a swig of beer from her glass. Then she gave a soft sigh. She didn’t show it openly, but she probably found her day-to-day adult life exhausting.

“Do you know the librarian in the secondary library? I caught this quick glimpse of him today, but there was something about him that made him seem like the ruler of that room…So I was thinking, he must have been there forever.”

“You mean Mr. Chibiki?”

“Yeah, that was his name.”

“You’re right, Koichi. He does give that sort of impression. The ‘ruler’ of the library. He’s been there since my time. He’s real crusty and always dresses all in black, and there’s something kind of mysterious about him. Most of the girls thought he was creepy.”

“I bet.”

“Did he say anything weird when you saw him today?”

“No, nothing special.”

Shaking my head slowly, I thought back on the scene.

I was the only one he'd ordered out of the library. What had become of Mei after that? Had she stayed there and kept working on her drawing? Or had she…

"By the way, Koichi," Reiko said, holding the glass of beer in one hand. "Are you planning to join a club or do anything after school?"

"Oh…good point. I wonder what I should do."

"Did you do anything at your last school?"

Since she'd asked, I answered honestly.

"I was in the culinary arts club."

I'd joined it with a touch of sarcasm intended for my father, who was happy to foist all the housework off on his only son. My cooking skill had gone up a couple levels thanks to that, but my father never showed any sign of noticing the results.

"I-I-I don't think North Yomi has anything like that," Reiko answered, her eyes softening in a smile.

"It's only one year anyway. I don't need to force myself to join something. Oh, but today someone asked me if I wanted to join the art club."

"Oh really?"

"But I dunno after all…"

"That's just like you, Koichi."

Draining what remained of her beer, Reiko rested both of her

elbows on the table and put both hands to her cheeks. Then she looked straight into my face and asked, “Do you like art?”

“I dunno about *like*. I think it’s kind of interesting…”

Reiko’s gaze felt like a blinding light. Unconsciously, I dipped my head slightly as I replied with exactly the feelings that came bubbling out of my heart.

“But I’m not very good at drawing. More like just plain bad at it.”

“Hm-m-m.”

“But despite that I, uh—this is a secret, okay? No one knows yet. But I kind of want to go to college for something related to art, if I can.”

“Wow, you do? That’s the first I’ve heard of it!”

“I want to try sculpture or plastic arts or something along those lines.”

My glass was filled with my grandmother’s specialty vegetable juice, which she had made for me. I took a timid sip of it, trying to be strong about the celery (which I despise) that she had mixed into it.

“What do you think? Pretty harebrained, right?”

I steeled myself. Reiko folded her arms over her chest and murmured again. “Hm-m-m.”

Finally she said, “Some advice. First: Speaking from experience, parents usually refuse out of hand when their kids say they want to go to art school or a fine arts academy.”

"…Not a surprise."

"I don't know what your dad would do. Maybe he's the type to tear into you if he finds out."

"I wouldn't expect that, but he might."

"Second," Reiko went on. "Even assuming you get into an art school or fine arts academy like you wanted, after you graduate you have shockingly few marketable job skills. Obviously some of that depends on how much talent you have, but the most important thing is luck, I think."

So that's what it was. Already with the realism…

"Third."

All right, already—I was ready to call it quits then and there. But Reiko's last piece of advice was a tiny bit of salvation, offered with kindness softening her eyes again.

"Despite that, if you really want to go for it, there's no reason to be afraid. I think it's very unbecoming to give up before you even try, whatever it is you're doing."

"You do?"

"Yeah. That's important to you, right? Whether you're cool or not?"

Reiko slowly rubbed her cheeks, which had flushed slightly with the effects of the alcohol, with both hands.

"Of course, the issue is whether or not *you* think you're cool."

6

The next day—Friday, May 8—I didn't see Mei Misaki all morning.

I thought maybe she was out sick, but she hadn't looked it yesterday at all…

Could it be…? My mind had hit on one possibility.

After we'd talked on the roof during gym class on Wednesday…

If you're on the roof and you hear the cawing of a crow, when you go back inside, you must enter with your left foot.

That was the first of the "North Yomi fundamentals" that Reiko had taught me. If you disobeyed and went in with the wrong foot, you'd get hurt within a month.

Whether or not Mei had heard the repeated cawing of the crows, she had gone in by her right foot. So…could it be that she'd been badly hurt because of that? Get real.

The fact that I was thinking these things half seriously, honestly worried, seemed utterly laughable when I stopped and took a levelheaded look at myself.

No way, I thought. *There was no way.* And yet, in the end, I couldn't bring myself to ask anyone why she was absent, either.

I never experienced this at the private K*** Middle School, but in public school, the second and fourth Saturdays were basically days off. There were apparently places where they allotted "hands-on studies" outside school to those days, but North Yomi didn't massage the system like that at all. It was up to the students how they would spend their increased free time.

And so the Saturday of the 9th, there was no school. I didn't need to get up early, either—or I wouldn't have, except I had to go to Yumigaoka Municipal Hospital today. I'd made a morning appointment for a checkup to see how my condition was progressing.

Of course, my grandmother had volunteered to go with me to the hospital; but when the time came, she wound up backing out. My grandfather, Ryohei, had developed a sudden fever that morning and had to stay in bed.

It didn't sound like anything terribly serious, but he was an old man whose behavior showed more than a little cause for day-to-day concern anyway. I realized that he probably couldn't be left alone in the house, and I reassured my grandmother, "Don't worry about it, I'll be fine."

"You will? Well, thank you, then."

Just as I'd thought, she didn't fight it this time.

"You be careful and come straight home. If you start to feel bad, you go right ahead and take a taxi home."

"Okay, Grandma, I got it."

“I don’t want you pushing yourself.”

“I won’t.”

“Do you have enough money?”

“Yes, Grandma, right here.”

We happened to be having this conversation near the porch on the first floor, so Ray the mynah bird overheard and cried out cheerily, “Why? Why?” in her shrill voice, ushering me out of the house.

“Why?…Cheer up. Cheer.”

8

“Good, good,” the lead physician murmured, nodding, after he’d scrutinized the images of my lungs lined up on the X-ray illuminator. He was a man just beginning to enter old age, and he issued his opinion with a breezy tone. “Everything looks clear. Excellent. No issues at all.

“Even so, exerting yourself is still out of the question. I’d say, let’s take another look in one or two weeks and if there are no changes, you should be okay for gym class.”

“Thank you.”

I bowed humbly, but I couldn’t help feeling a slight anxiety inside. Last fall, I’d had an outpatient checkup like this shortly after I was released from the hospital. I’d gotten the same go-ahead then, too…

But of course, no matter how much I worried about stuff like that going forward, it wouldn't change anything. *"You should be out of the woods now, too."* I should just go ahead and trust the optimistic view of a survivor…Yeah. That was best.

The outpatient ward at municipal hospitals is always horribly crowded, no matter where it is. By the time my checkup was over and I'd finished paying at the window, lunchtime was already long gone. As a now–mostly healthy fifteen-year-old boy, I felt my hunger begin to torment me, but I wasn't thrilled at the idea of the hospital cafeteria. I'll just find a hamburger place or some doughnuts on my way home. I had left the hospital and was heading for the bus stop when all at once I reconsidered.

I was visiting the hospital for the first time in ten days, and thankfully (though she'd probably get mad at me for saying it) my grandmother wasn't with me. I had **nothing better to do**, so it would be stupid not to act somehow, even in the smallest way. This was a far more important issue than my current hunger, wasn't it? Yes, it was.

I decided to go back into the hospital. And I headed for the place that had served as the main stage for my life at the end of last month: the inpatient ward.

"What's this? How's it going, Horror Boy?"

I'd taken the elevator up to the fourth floor and was just swinging by the window at the nurse's station when I ran into a nurse I recognized, just then coming out into the hall. Skinny and tall, her large, bugging eyes giving her an unbalanced look…It was Ms.

Mizuno.

She had told me that she'd just gotten her full qualifications as a nurse last year. It hadn't been long since she started working there, but she was probably the hospital worker I'd talked to the most during my ten days there. Ms. Sanae Mizuno.

"Oh, hello."

Ask and you shall receive—it wasn't quite as grand as all that, but this chance encounter right at this moment was something I had hoped and prayed for.

"What's wrong? It's Sakakibara…Koichi, right? Your chest didn't get messed up again, did it?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that." I quickly shook my head. "I came for an outpatient checkup today. No issues, they said."

"Oh. But then what are you doing up here?"

"Because, um, I wanted to see you."

I realized that sounded kind of inappropriate even as I said it.

Ms. Mizuno instantly came back with a theatrical reaction. "Well, I'm flattered! I thought maybe you'd be lonely at your new school if you didn't find some cronies to talk horror with…but you're not, are you? How is it?"

"It's…Well, the truth is, I wanted to ask you something."

The thing that had first brought us to such friendly terms was the Stephen King novel I'd been reading while I was hospitalized. Her eyes had landed on the title.

“Is this all you read?” she’d asked me.

“Not *all*, no.”

Her expression was that of a person witnessing something abnormal, so I was going to respond even more curtly, but then—

“So what else do you read then?” she asked next.

I blurted out, “Uh…Koontz, I guess.”

That made her chortle and fold her arms over her chest like an old man. She looked as though she was holding back a fit of laughter. That was when she’d given me the nickname “Horror Boy.”

“It’s pretty unusual for someone who’s hospitalized to read things like that.”

“Is it?”

“After all, people usually want to avoid being scared or in pain, no? And when they’re sick or hurt, they actually are scared and in pain.”

“I guess. But I mean, it’s only a story in a book, so I don’t really…”

“Yup. You’re totally right. I’m impressed, Horror Boy.”

What became clear almost instantly was that she, too, was actually pretty into “things like that” herself. Asian or Western, modern or classic, she would read the novels and watch the movies. Apparently she was feeling pretty lonely herself since she didn’t have any “cronies to talk horror with” at her job. And so up until the day I was discharged, she would tell me the works she recommended

by authors I had never read, like John Saul and Michael Slade.

But I digress.

I had told Ms. Mizuno, “I wanted to ask you something,” promising myself I would have some other chance to discuss our common interest.

“On April twenty-seventh—that was Monday of last week. Did a girl die at this hospital that day?”

9

“On April twenty-seventh?”

She obviously thought it was a strange question. Ms. Mizuno blinked her goggling eyes.

“Last week, Monday, eh? You were still here then, weren’t you?”

“Yeah. That was the day they took the drain out.”

“And what’s this about, all of a sudden?”

It was a natural question to turn back on me. But I wasn’t confident that I could explain the situation in detail without trampling on the nuances.

“I just…something’s been nagging at me.”

So I offered an ambiguous response.

That day—around noon last Monday, chance brought me to my first encounter with Mei Misaki in the hospital elevator. She’d

gotten off at the second basement level. Where there are no patient rooms or exam rooms. The only thing down there besides storage rooms and the machine room is the memorial chapel.

…The memorial chapel.

I think the distinctive image of that place had kept nagging at me ever since. So, extrapolating from what I knew, I had asked Ms. Mizuno the question I did.

Let's assume the memorial chapel is where Mei was going that day. People usually don't go to an empty memorial chapel. Rationally, the body of someone who'd died in the hospital that day must have been resting there. Wasn't that the explanation?

Why did I think it was a girl who'd died?

This, too, was a grasping extrapolation, based on the riddle Mei had spoken that day (*half my body, the poor thing*...).

"Sounds like there's something complicated going on."

Ms. Mizuno puffed out one of her cheeks and squinted into my face.

"I'm not going to order you to give me the details, but…let me think."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"As far as the patients I'm in charge of, anyway, there weren't any girls who died. But I don't know about in the whole ward."

"Well, there's something else, too…"

I decided to change my question.

“Did you see a girl wearing a school uniform in the inpatient ward that day?”

“Wha-a-at? Another girl?”

“It would be a middle school uniform. A navy blue blazer. She has short hair and an eye patch over her left eye.”

“An eye patch?” Ms. Mizuno cocked her head. “An ophthalmology patient? Oh, wait. Hold on a second.”

“Did you see her?”

“Not that. The thing about any girls passing away that day.”

“Yeah?!”

“Hm-m-m. Let me see-e-e…” As she murmured, Ms. Mizuno began tapping the middle finger of her right hand against her temple. “…I think there might have been one.”

“Really?”

“I think so, but I only heard about it in passing.”

She moved us to the sparsely populated lounge, rather than standing in the hallway of the ward with all its traffic from patients and their families and doctors and nurses. She was probably making the point that if we kept standing around talking out in the hall, there might be problems.

“I’m not totally sure, but you said it was last Monday…I think it was around then,” Ms. Mizuno said, keeping her voice pretty low.

“Was it a girl? I remember some talk about a young patient who’d been hospitalized here for a while who suddenly passed away.”

“Do you know the person’s name?”

My heart was pounding harder than I liked. At the same time, I don’t know why, but I couldn’t keep a shudder from running through my whole body.

“Do you know their name, or what they were sick with, or any details?”

After hesitating for a moment, Ms. Mizuno stole a glance around and then lowered her voice even more. “Why don’t I see what I can find out?”

“You won’t get in trouble?”

“If I just ask around, it shouldn’t be too hard. You had a cell phone, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Give me the number.”

She gave the order briskly, pulling her own phone out of a pocket in her smock.

“I’ll let you know when I find out anything.”

“Really? You won’t get in trouble?”

“For an old horror buddy. You came all the way up here; you must have **some reason** for it,” the novice nurse who liked horror novels said, a teasing look in her bulging eyes. “In exchange, you

have to tell me why you want to know sometime. Okay, Horror Boy?"

10

BLUE EYES EMPTY TO ALL,

It was well before twilight began to fall in the city of Yomiyama when I found this eccentric sign board.

I was on my way home from Yumigaoka.

I'd gotten off the bus at a place called Akatsuki, located at the halfway point between the hospital and my grandparents' house (as I figured it, using the half-formed map in my mind). I had addressed my hunger at a fast-food place I saw there, then walked around the modest downtown nearby. Despite it being a Saturday afternoon, the town was almost empty and, as I wandered the streets, I recognized the faces of none of the people I passed, naturally enough. No one spoke to me and I spoke to no one, and nothing particularly drew my interest. I moved away from the downtown, and away from the bus route, down a narrow alleyway, and came upon an area with a bunch of really nice houses, then came out the other side of that, too, in the end…I didn't have a particular motivation in mind. I was just walking wherever the spirit took me.

And if I got lost, well, things would work themselves out.

That's the spirit I'd gone into my excursion with. Such is the strength of a boy who'd lived for fifteen years in Tokyo without a mother, perhaps.

I realized that today was the third week since I'd come to Yomiyama and it was the first time I'd spent any time with this much freedom—unconcerned about the looks of others. If I didn't get back home before nightfall, I knew my grandmother would be incredibly worried, but she would probably call my cell phone when that happened.

Freedom was finally mine to savor!

—is not how I felt, at all. Truly, all I wanted was to go aimlessly around the town on foot, by myself. That was it.

It was just past three in the afternoon…and yet the world seemed strangely washed out. I felt no sign that it was about to start raining, and yet unseasonably dark clouds were piled high overhead. All at once, I got the idea that they were a reflection of my own state of mind…

Only moments before, I had seen a sign with the town's name, "Misaki," on a utility pole.

Another "Misaki," huh? Different characters, but…

I jotted the name down on the so-so map in my mind. I guessed that my current location was, very roughly speaking, in the center of a triangle formed by the hospital, my grandparents' house, and the school.

That was when it happened.

There was a road on a hill with a pretty steep grade.

I could see small shops here and there, each separate from the others, but I was in the midst of a deserted residential area, and suddenly—

BLUE EYES EMPTY TO ALL,

My eyes stopped on the eccentric sign where these words were written, in cream-colored paint on a painted black board.

An unfriendly three-story building made of concrete. The building had a different look from the private homes nearby: sort of like a multitenant building, but it didn't look as if there were shops or offices on the second and third floors.

The sign poked out almost imperceptibly beside a door that appeared to be the entrance to the first floor. Beside that was an exterior staircase that went directly to the upper floors. An oval fixed-sash window faced the road, a slight distance from the entrance. Was it a show window? If so, there weren't any lights on inside, and it had a plain look—**as if it wasn't even being used**.

Unconsciously coming to a halt, I looked at the sign again, reading out the words written there in a low voice.

"Blue Eyes Empty to All, in the Twilight of Yomi…what is that?"

Below this was another board, like a placard, this one of old, unvarnished wood. On it were the following words, written with

what looked like a calligraphy brush:

What was this place?

An antique shop, or something like that? Or maybe…

All of a sudden, I felt as if someone, somewhere were watching me. I looked around, but there wasn't even anyone walking down the street, let alone someone staring at me.

The sky was low and darker than ever. The image of this one corner of the town called Misaki being dragged down rapidly into twilight had seized my mind. I walked over to the oval window, half fearful.

Beyond the glass it was dim, preventing me from seeing in very well. I walked right up to the window and brought my face close to the glass to peer inside.

"Waugh!"

A brief cry escaped me and my body froze. A cold numbness surged in an instant from the back of my neck through both shoulders and into my arms.

Beyond the window was…

There was **something** incredibly strange, and very beautiful.

A round black table was set on the floor, a deep red cloth spread over it. Above that, the top half of a woman was visible, wearing a black veil that she lifted from her face with both hands.

Her skin pale and smooth, her features frighteningly attractive…it was a young girl. The hair falling to her chest was black as jet. And yet her eyes were a deep green. The red dress she wore was, like her body, cut off at the waist.

"…Wow."

It was intensely strange, and very beautiful, this doll of a young girl made almost to life-size. Only the top half of her body had been set out as decoration.

What was this place?

What was this…?

Marveling, I took another look at the sign beside the entrance.

Just then, a crass vibration started in the pocket of my jacket. I was getting a call on my cell phone.

Was my grandmother already worrying?

Convinced of the name I would see, I let out a short sigh and took out my phone. But the liquid crystal screen displayed an unidentified number.

"…Hello?"

As soon as I picked up, I heard a woman's voice. "This is Sakakibara, right?"

I recognized it—after all, I had heard this voice firsthand only hours earlier. It was Ms. Mizuno from the municipal hospital.

“I found out something, about that thing we talked about.”

“Really? That was fast.”

“An informed coworker of mine who loves to gossip got hold of me, so I asked her right away. She said she’d heard the story from someone else, so this info might not be a hundred percent accurate. But it would be tough to get in and check the paperwork. Is that okay?”

“Definitely.”

My hand tightened on the cell phone involuntarily. Another shudder was going through my body.

“Please tell me.”

Even as I answered, I couldn’t tear my gaze from the doll inside the window.

“Last Monday, there was in fact a patient who passed away,” Ms. Mizuno told me. “A girl in middle school.”

“Uh-huh?”

“She’d had major surgery at another hospital, then been transferred here. The surgery had been a huge success and she was recovering smoothly, but then suddenly she took a turn for the worse. There wasn’t enough time for the doctors to do everything they could have. She was an only child, and apparently her parents were incoherent with grief.”

“What was her name?” I asked. I had linked the eyes of the girl in the window, staring out at me from the gloom, to the words *blue eyes empty to all*. “Do you know the girl’s name?”

“Um-m-m…” Ms. Mizuno’s voice crackled. The signal was breaking up. “I heard this from the same coworker, and she wasn’t very clear about it either…but I got something out of her.”

“Uh-huh?”

“The girl’s name was Misaki or Masaki, or something like that.”

Chapter 4

May III

1

I next stood in the town of Misaki outside the “Blue Eyes Empty to All, in the Twilight of Yomi” Friday the week after, and this time it really was twilight.

Last week had been purely by chance.

I had found **this place** by rambling aimlessly through the town, but this time the situation was a little different. Which isn’t to say that I had intended to come here from the start. I had moved with **a different purpose** and, as a result, had returned without meaning to.

There was still time before the sun disappeared. But the level of light in the area already merited the word “twilight.” Even if someone I knew were to come up to me in the red rays of the western sun, I don’t think I’d be able to figure out who it was right away.

I had already forgotten my **original purpose.** I should leave it and just go home. That thought had brought me to the verge of turning on my heel when I noticed something. That sign for “Twilight of Yomi” was right in front of my face.

My feet went toward it, as if it were sucking me in. Beyond the elliptical show window was the beautiful yet disturbing doll of the girl’s upper body, just like last week, and her “blue eyes empty to all” reflected my image vacantly.

What was this place?

What was it like inside?

These were the things that had been constantly on my mind since that first day.

There was no way to resist my curiosity. I banished my original purpose to a corner of my mind and pushed open the door beside the sign.

A bell overhead jangled dully and I took a timid step forward.

A gloomy, indirect light more like twilight than the twilight outside served to set the mood. The space went off into obscurity, farther back than I had expected, and was quite vast. Rings of faint light were picked out here and there by wispy, colored spotlights, bringing a variety of dolls large and small out of the darkness. There were big ones over a meter tall, and even more smaller ones.

“Hello there.”

A voice greeted its customer.

To the left of the entrance—the spot right behind the show window—was a long, thin table, behind which I could see a figure. It wore clothes of a dull color that seemed to melt into the gloom within the shop. From the sound of the voice, I could tell it was a woman, and an old woman at that.

“Uh…h-hello.”

“What’s this? We don’t get many young men in here. Are you a customer? Or perhaps…”

“Um, I was just passing by outside and wondered what kind of

shop this was. This…*is* a shop, right?"

There was an ancient cash register at one end of the table. A small chalkboard was propped up in front of it with the words "Gallery Entry—¥500" in yellow chalk. I rummaged in the pockets of my school uniform and pulled out a coin purse.

"You're in middle school?" the old woman asked, startling me.

I collected myself, then replied, "Yes, at North Yomi."

"Then you can go in for half price."

"Uh, thank you."

I went up to the table and handed over the amount she'd asked for. The hand she proffered was, indeed, ancient and wrinkly, and now I could clearly see her face surfacing from the gloom.

Her hair was perfectly white all through, and her nose was hooked like a sorcerer's. I couldn't tell what her eyes were like, since she wore glasses with dark green lenses.

"Um…is this a doll shop?" I asked softly.

"A doll shop? Well, now." The old woman tilted her head slightly to one side and made stifled mumbling sounds. "I suppose we're half-shop, half-gallery."

"…Oh."

"We do sell things, but not anything a boy in middle school could afford. But you take your time and have a look around. There aren't any other customers right now, anyway."

The old woman placed both hands on the table and slowly leaned forward, bringing her face closer to me. The mannerism suggested she couldn't see me very well otherwise.

"I'll make you some tea, if you like," the old woman said, so close that I could feel her breath. "We have a sofa in the back, so you feel free to go sit down and rest if you get tired."

"Okay. Oh, but…I don't need any tea, thank you."

"Well, take your time."

2

Inside the shop—I suppose I should really say, "inside the gallery"—music was playing, string music that was just as gloomy as the lighting. It sounded as if the main part of the melody was played by a cello. I had heard the song somewhere before, but (I guess sadly) I was completely lacking in that sort of education. If someone told me it was a famous classical song by one of the masters or that it was a chart-topper released in the '90s, all I'd be able to do is say "Is it really?" and accept what they told me.

My bag was bugging me, so I set it on the sofa in the back and, trying to breathe quietly and silence my footsteps, I went around looking at the dolls that thronged at every turn.

At first I couldn't stop myself from glancing over to check on the old woman at the table, but soon I stopped worrying about her. I was utterly taken in by the dolls and had no more attention to spare.

In the murky twilight, some of the dolls were standing, some were sitting, and others were lying down. Their eyes were opened wide in surprise, or they were sunk in contemplation, their eyelids half-closed, or they dozed…

Most of the dolls were beautiful young girls, but there were young boys among them, too, and even animals. There were even some strange fabrications that mixed human and animal together. And there was more than just dolls: pictures hung on the walls, too. An oil painting of a faintly fantastical scene caught my eye.

Like the doll of the girl in the show window, about half of the dolls were ball-jointed. All of their joints—their wrists, elbows, shoulders, ankles, knees, and hips—were formed into spheres so that they could be moved freely and posed. It imparted a certain unique, bewitching impression.

How can I express it? Though instilled with a cold, saccharine realism, they were not truly real. They resembled people without truly resembling them. They were a part of the mortal world, but did not truly belong. As if they had managed to take on these forms and preserve a shadow of their existence at this vague seam between here and there…

…How long had it been?

I had been taking deep breaths. I felt as if, without realizing it, a bizarre idea had taken hold of me: that I had to breathe for them, who had no breath.

I had a passing knowledge about these kinds of dolls.

I had found a photo collection in my father's library by a German doll maker named Hans Bellmer, I think, the spring break right before I started middle school. I'd also seen a couple of photo collections with tons of dolls of the same kind, made by lots of people in Japan, that drew some amount of influence from him.

This was my first experience seeing real ones up close, though, and so many of them at that.

I focused on continuing to breathe deeply. Partly because if I didn't, it seemed that my own breath might stop and I would never notice.

Most of the dolls were accompanied by placards with the name of the person who had made them. Same with the pictures on the walls. None of them were names I knew, but for all I knew some famous artists might have been among them.

VISITORS WELCOME

After I'd finished a quick survey of the forest of dolls and was about to go back to the sofa and grab my bag, I discovered this flyer on a wall in a corner all the way at the back.

There was an arrow drawn next to the words, pointing at an angle downward. *Huh?* Looking much, much closer, I saw what appeared to be stairs descending to the basement.

I turned to look back at the old woman.

She sat in the gloom behind the table, her head bowed, not moving in the slightest. Maybe she was in the middle of a nap. Or she could have been thinking about something. In either case…

Since it clearly said “visitors welcome,” I didn’t think I had to ask before going downstairs.

Still breathing deeply, I quietly made my way to the stairs.

3

There was less room to move around in the basement than on the first floor. It felt like a crypt. The temperature was low and it was pretty chilly.

Probably because they kept a dehumidifier running to control the humidity. Even with these practical thoughts in my mind, and perhaps because of the cold crawling up through my feet, I felt as if energy was being sapped from my body with each step down that I took. When I’d descended the staircase, my mind clouded for some reason and my shoulders grew heavy, as if I were carrying some invisible burden.

And then—

Just as I’d expected, though I’d had no concrete reason to think it, a scene fully separated from the world of mortals awaited me there.

In the lighting as gloomy as that on the first floor, but with a slightly stronger white glow…

A huge number of dolls were set on an antique card table, on chairs with armrests, in curio cases, on a mantel over a fireplace, or even right on the floor. It might be more accurate to say not “dolls,” but “all their various parts.”

Upper bodies, like the girl in the window, rested on a table, abdomens sat in the chairs, heads and hands were arranged on several display shelves. That was the state of this room. Several arms stood on end inside the fireplace and feet poked out from chairs and shelves.

When I describe it like that, it’s hard to get away from thinking the place was sick/grotesque, but oddly, I didn’t think so. I could feel, I don’t know why, a kind of overarching aesthetic in the organization of the space, including the disorderly, cluttered arrangement of all these parts. And yet, maybe it was only my imagination.

Aside from the fireplace, there were several niche-like depressions formed in the white mortar-painted walls. Obviously, these had been turned into doll holders, too.

There was one depression with a doll missing only a right arm, its features very like the girl in the window. In the depression next to this was a young boy with the lower half of his face hidden, thin bat-like wings folded behind him. There was also a depression holding beautiful conjoined twins whose abdomens were linked.

As my feet carried me slowly to the middle of the floor, I made an even more conscious effort to breathe deeply.

With each breath, the cool air seeped into my lungs, then spread

through my entire body. I felt as if I were drawing closer and closer to their world. The thought struck me out of nowhere. Or maybe…

The same gloomy string music that was playing upstairs. If the music stopped, I might be able to hear the secret whispers passing between the dolls in this cool basement room. That feeling came over me, too…

Why?

What was I doing in a place like this, surrounded on all sides by these *things*?

It wasn't a question I had posed to myself in such concrete terms, of course.

Ugh, it's too late to be…

…**My original purpose**. To use a not-very-nice name for it, I'd been following someone.

When sixth period had ended, I'd left the classroom with Yuya Mochizuki, the Munch aficionado, whose house lay in the same direction as mine. Somehow Kazami and Teshigawara and a small, baby-faced boy named Maejima (apparently he's actually one of the best in the kendo club) ended up joining us. Suddenly, out a window in the hall, I saw Mei Misaki walking through the schoolyard. For some reason she hadn't shown up to any afternoon classes that day, and I didn't know where she'd gone.

From the perspective of the guys with me, the way I acted right after I saw her must have been groan-inducing. "Not again…" As soon as I could abruptly say, "Well, I'll see you guys," I left them

behind and ran off.

It was Mei, who hadn't shown herself at school all Monday and Tuesday that week.

Maybe she really had been badly hurt? Her absence had inflated my worry, but then on Wednesday morning she appeared looking totally blameless and sat inconspicuously at her desk all the way at the back next to the window, just like always. I didn't see any sign that she'd been hurt or sick.

I thought that maybe, like last week, we'd be able to talk on the roof during gym class that day. But my hopes were quickly betrayed. She simply wasn't there. And that's how the day ended, too. But the Thursday and Friday that followed—in other words, yesterday and today—I'd been able to find a couple of opportunities to share a few words with her. To be honest, I would have liked to take more time and talk about a lot more, but what could I do? I never got an opening to bring anything up…

And then I had spotted her just as I was heading home.

When I think back now, it's pretty embarrassing. I basically acted purely on the impulse of the moment. I burst out of the school building and ran in the direction she'd been going. I saw her leaving the campus through the back gate, and I could have called out to stop her, but I dismissed that option and decided to follow her without announcing myself.

This was where my original purpose—"following someone"—had begun.

I followed Mei, time and again thinking I had lost sight of her on the streets outside the school, which I still didn't know very well, but then I would find her again. When I got close enough that I could call out to her, of course I intended to do that. But for some reason, the whole time the distance between the two of us never shrank and, at some point, the act of following her itself became my goal.

Twilight was beginning to creep in, and I lost sight of Mei once and for all. That was just a little while ago. Having no idea whatsoever which roads I had taken to get here, without realizing it, I had arrived here—beside the "Blue Eyes Empty to All, in the Twilight of Yomi" in the town of Misaki.

Mei Misaki.

In the few days that had passed since I came to this school, the alienness—you could call it the "enigma"—that surrounded her had grown stronger and deeper, creating a certain "shape" in my mind.

Even so, I couldn't really grasp **what it was** fully. There was a mountain's worth of things I didn't understand or couldn't form opinions about—actually, I suppose the things I didn't understand still far outnumbered everything else. There was also what Ms. Mizuno had told me about. I struggled trying to figure out how I should interpret the information she'd given me, but nothing came together. Honestly, I was pretty much at a loss.

Asking her would be the quickest way, I knew. I knew that, but…

"…Ack!"

Something close to a scream escaped me. I had just noticed something set all the way in the back of this bizarre space that had been created in the basement, something my eyes had so far missed.

It was…

Standing there, easily as tall as a child, painted black, was a hexagonal box. A coffin? Yeah, that's a coffin. A large, Western-style coffin had been secreted away down here, and inside it…

My head was starting to cloud and I shook it fiercely. Rubbing my chilled shoulders with both hands, I walked up to the coffin. The doll inside it—it was of a style different than the other dolls on this floor. My eyes were arrested by it.

Inside the coffin was a doll of a young girl, complete with all its parts—hands, legs, head—clothed in a thin, pallid dress.

It was a bit smaller than life-size. I could say that with certainty because I knew someone who looked exactly like this doll.

"…Mei?"

That was why my voice trembled slightly as I spoke.

"Why would…"

Why would it look like Mei?

The hair was reddish-brown, unlike Mei's, and went past the shoulders, but the features, the build…all of it was exactly the same as the Mei Misaki I knew.

The right eye, fixed on empty space, was a "blue eye empty to all." The left eye was hidden behind her hair. The skin tone was even

more pale and waxen than the real Mei. Her mouth, edged with a pale tint on the lips, was slightly open and looked as if it might start speaking at any moment…

What would it say?

To whom?

What *are* you…?

I grew even dizzier. I cradled my head gently in both hands and stood frozen before the coffin, spellbound, stunned. Just then—

Out of nowhere, **her** voice came to my ears, though I don't know how I could possibly be hearing it.

"Huh. So this stuff doesn't bother you, Sakakibara?"

4

Obviously the doll in the coffin hadn't spoken—that was impossible. But for just a moment the delusion had me in its grip, and I'm not even exaggerating when I say I was so surprised, I thought my lung was going to collapse again. I fell back a step, uncomprehending, my eyes locked credulously on the doll's lips.

The next moment, I thought I heard a snort. But of course the doll's lips hadn't moved at all.

"Why"—again it was her voice that spoke—"are you here?"

That was definitely the voice of Mei Misaki. So then it really was coming from the doll right in front of my eyes.

Was it a hallucination? It couldn't be…

I pulled my hands away from my head and swung my head around. When I did, I saw a new figure.

A dark red curtain that had been pulled aside, in the shadow of the coffin that stood before it. That was where she had appeared from, without a sound—the real Mei Misaki.

To me, it was as if the doll standing before me were casting a shadow that had materialized there, solid and real, though she wore the uniform of North Yomi and not a dress.

I gurgled, purely reflexively, "How did you…"

"I wasn't trying to hide in here and scare you," Mei said in her usual curt tone. "You only just got here, after all."

…So then what have *you* been doing in a place like this? More importantly, how did you suddenly appear in a place like that? I mean, geez…

Mei passed quietly by the coffin. She wasn't carrying her schoolbag.

She came to a stop in front of the coffin and cast a glance at the doll behind her.

"Did you think she looked like me?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah."

"She does. But she's only half of what I am. Maybe not even that."

With those words, she slowly reached her right hand out to the doll and stroked its reddish-brown hair. That exposed its hidden left eye. It had no eye patch like Mei's, but instead a "blue eye empty to all," just like the right one.

"What are you doing here?"

I finally got the question out.

Mei drew a quick finger down the doll's cheek. "I come down here sometimes. Since I don't hate it in here."

…Which didn't tell me much.

It didn't answer the question of why she'd come into this building in the first place.

"More importantly, I have something I want to ask you." Turning her back on the doll in the coffin, Mei faced me again. "Why did you come here, Sakakibara?"

"Uh…I was—"

I couldn't admit that I'd followed her all the way from school.

"I've been wondering about this shop for a while. I wandered past here last week and saw it. So today I decided to come inside."

Mei's expression didn't change particularly; she just nodded. "Oh. That's an interesting coincidence. Some people think dolls like the ones in this gallery are creepy. You're not one of them, huh?"

"Well…"

"What did you think? When you came in here?"

“I thought it was amazing. I can’t really express it, but they’re beautiful. It’s like they’re not of this world, and when I’m looking at them, this turmoil starts up in my chest…”

I tried hard to find the words, but all I could manage were these clumsy descriptions. Mei gave no response. She walked over to one of the depressions formed in the wall.

“I like these ones the best.”

She peered into the depression. The dolls inside were the beautiful conjoined twins I’d seen earlier.

“They have such peaceful faces. They can be so calm, even though they’re linked like this. It’s strange.”

“Maybe they’re calm because they’re linked.”

Mei muttered, “I doubt it,” then went on, “If they were calm because they’re *not* linked to each other, I could see it.”

“Hm-m-m.”

Wasn’t it usually the opposite? That’s what I thought, but I said nothing and simply watched her movements. She shifted, and I thought she was going to turn back toward me, but suddenly she proclaimed, “You’ve been wondering why I wear an eye patch over my left eye, haven’t you?”

“No, I—”

“Why don’t I show you?”

“Wha—?”

“Why don’t I show you what’s under this eye patch?”

As she spoke, Mei rested the fingertips of her left hand on the white eye patch. The fingers of her right hand held the string that ran over her ear.

Massively shocked, massively confused, I couldn’t tear my eyes from the movement of her hands. The string music playing in the background had ended at some point. In this bizarre basement room, filled with silence, surrounded only by the voiceless dolls, I was seized by the feeling that she was doing something indecent and I hurried to shake it off…

Any second now…

Mei’s eye patch came off. I saw her exposed left eye and gulped.

“Th-that’s…”

A blue eye, empty to all.

“Is that…a fake eye?”

Just like the doll in the coffin.

It was obviously no match for the jet-black eye on her right side, which was fixed on me. She had a blue eye exactly like the one nestled in the doll’s eye socket, harboring a lifeless light…

“My left eye is *a doll’s eye*,” Mei told me in a whisper. “It can see things better not seen, so I usually keep it hidden.”

…Which didn’t really explain much.

I didn’t understand what she meant. Or her reasoning.

My head had started swimming again. My breathing was getting pretty ragged, and it felt as if my heart was pounding right inside my ears. Underneath it all, my body felt even colder than before.

"Are you feeling all right?"

I shook my head feebly in response. Mei narrowed the eye that was not a doll's eye to a slit.

"Maybe this place isn't so great if you're not used to it."

"What do you mean?"

"The dolls…" Mei started to say something, then trailed off. She put her eye patch back in place, then started over. "The dolls are empty."

Empty, in the twilight of Yomi…

"Dolls are emptiness. Their bodies and hearts are total emptiness…a void. That emptiness is like death."

Mei continued speaking, as if covertly exposing a secret of the mortal world.

"Things that are empty want to fill themselves with something. When they get put into an enclosed space like this, with the balance this place has…it gets bad. That's why. Don't you feel it being **sucked out of you?** Everything you have inside you?"

"Yeah…"

"You don't really mind, once you're used to it. Let's go." With that, Mei slipped past me and started up the stairs. "Upstairs it's not so bad."

5

The old woman was no longer at the table beside the entrance. I wondered where she'd disappeared to. The bathroom? The string music was still gone, and the gloomy shop—gallery—was eerily quiet. So quiet, in fact, it seemed "death" might even be nearby…

Mei showed no sign of fear and sat down on the sofa where I'd left my bag. She said nothing, and I followed her example, sitting to face her at an angle

"Do you come here often?"

I started off the questions gingerly.

"I guess," Mei replied dryly, mumbling.

"Do you live near here?"

"Well, yeah."

"This place…on that sign outside, it says 'Blue Eyes Empty to All…' Is that the name of this shop—this gallery?"

Mei nodded in silence, so I pressed on.

"What about 'Studio M'? There was a placard for that underneath the sign."

"The second floor is a doll workshop."

"So they make these dolls there?"

"They make *Kirika's* dolls there," Mei corrected.

“Kirika?”

“It’s written with the characters for ‘mist’ and ‘fruit.’ That’s the person who makes the dolls in the studio upstairs.”

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered seeing that artist’s name on several of the placards that accompanied each of the dolls in the gallery’s horde. And maybe even next to some of the pictures on the wall.

“The dolls in the basement, too?” I glanced over at the stairs in the back. “None of those had placards on them.”

“She probably made them all.”

“The one in the coffin, too?”

“…Yeah.”

“That doll…why does it—” I just had to ask the question then. “Why does it look so much like you?”

“Who knows,” Mei cocked her head slightly, but let the question slide right past. Was she just feigning ignorance? That’s what it looked like.

I’m sure there was a reason for it. I’m sure she knew exactly what it was. And yet…

I sighed quietly and looked down at my knees.

I had a bunch of other questions. But what should I ask, and how to phrase it? How should I lead into it? Bleh. It was no use philosophizing over it. These were problems that didn’t really seem to have an answer I could point to and say, “That’s it! That’s the best

option.”

Steeling my nerves, I spoke again. “I asked you about this that time we talked on the roof. When I met you that first time in the hospital elevator, you had something with you. Was that a doll, too?”

The last time I’d asked her that, she’d refused to answer. But today, Mei’s reaction was different.

“Yeah, it was.”

“You said you were ‘dropping it off’ somewhere?”

“…Yeah.”

“You got off at the second basement level, right? Were you going to the memorial chapel?”

At that, Mei’s eyes darted away from me, as if fleeing something, and silence plunked back into place. If the answer had been no, at least, she wouldn’t have done that. That’s how I saw it.

“That day—it was April twenty-seventh. I heard there was a girl who passed away at that hospital. Did you…”

Maybe the lights were playing a role. Mei’s face seemed even more pale and waxen than usual. Her colorless lips seemed to be trembling slightly.

Uh-oh…She’s about to turn into a doll, just like that one in the coffin downstairs. That idiotic thought flitted through my mind, and my heart seized tightly.

“…Um…”

I fumbled for something to say, searching for a way to keep the conversation moving.

"Um, what I meant was…"

Going by what Ms. Mizuno had told me over the phone last Saturday…

The girl who had died at the hospital on the day in question was named "Misaki" or "Masaki." What did that mean? Did it imply anything? It wasn't too hard to come up with some conjectures that would make everything add up, but even so…

"Misaki, do you…have an older sister, or a younger sister maybe?" I asked boldly. There was a slight pause and then, her eyes still turned away, still silent, Mei shook her head.

She was an only child, and apparently her parents were incoherent with grief.

Ms. Mizuno had also told me that when she'd called.

The girl who'd died was an only child. And Mei didn't have any sisters. And yet there was nothing inconsistent in their stories. If she wasn't her sister, she could be her **cousin**, or maybe…All kinds of possibilities occurred to me. It was the same with the question of whether the girl was named "Misaki" or "Masaki." It could just be a coincidence, or it could be totally inevitable. Or there could have been some mistake in the story I got…

"Then why were you…?"

When I tried to ask her more, I met with flashing resistance.

“I wonder why!” Mei said, turning her eyes back onto me. I could feel a coldness from her jet-black eye—the eye that had never belonged to a doll—that seemed, somehow, to see right through everything. This time, without meaning to, I was the one who looked away.

Small goose bumps were prickling on both my arms. I felt as if tiny bugs were scurrying around inside my head.

What was this? What was going on?

I was a little bit disconcerted.

I started forcing myself to take deep breaths again, my eyes roving over the armies of dolls. It felt as though every last one of them was staring at me. The old woman still wasn’t back at her table…I suddenly recalled, at this moment, the conversation I’d had with the old woman a few minutes earlier. It was only now that **a certain phrase** caught my attention…What had she meant by **that**?

…God, I really was messed up. Just a little…no, totally messed up.

After taking an extraordinarily deep breath, I turned my eyes back to Mei.

For an instant, as she sat on the sofa, the level of light made her entire figure seem to transform into the deepest of shadows. The sensation I’d felt when I first saw her in the classroom rose again in my mind. A “shadow,” whose outlines were ill-defined, with only the faintest sense of reality…

“I’m sure you have a lot of other things you want to ask me,” Mei

said.

"Uh, well…"

"You aren't going to?"

Her bald question left me scrambling for a quick response. Her name tag, glinting on the front of her school uniform, now rested in the corner of my eye. The two characters—*Misaki*—written in black ink on the wrinkled and dirty light purple card stock…

I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, then opened them, trying to somehow calm my emotions.

"Ever since I transferred here, there have been things that seem odd to me. And…well, that's why…"

"I told you to be careful, didn't I?" Mei let out a soft sigh as she ran her fingertips over the edge of her eye patch. "I told you not to come near me. But maybe now it's too late."

"Too late? For what?"

"You still don't know anything, do you, Sakakibara?" She sighed softly again, then lifted her back from the support of the sofa. "We have an old story."

Mei began to recount the story, her tone of voice dropping somewhat.

"A story of long ago…of twenty-six years ago at Yomiyama North Middle, in third-year Class 3. No one's told you this story yet, have they?"

6

"Twenty-six years ago, there was a third-year **student** at North Yomi. A student who had been popular with everyone since first year. Good at schoolwork and at sports, talented in art and music… and yet, not such an amazing student that it would make you gag. Kind to absolutely everyone, with just the right amount of friendliness. So this student was beloved by everyone, students and teachers alike."

Mei told the story quietly, her gaze fixed on a single point in space. I listened in silence.

"As it happened, this kid changed classes when starting third year and joined Class 3. When first semester started, right after turning fifteen, this student suddenly died. There's a story that this student and their family were in a plane crash, but there are all kinds of other versions, too. That it was a car accident instead of a plane crash, or that it was a house fire…all kinds.

"Anyway, everyone in class was completely shocked. *It can't be true, I don't believe it*, and so on. Everyone was completely grief-stricken. But then out of the throng, suddenly someone spoke up."

Mei shot a glance over at me, but I stayed quiet. I was at a complete a loss for how to respond.

"*Misaki didn't die*, they said."

Mei went on quietly.

"*Look, Misaki's with us right now.* This person pointed at the

desk the student had used and said, *Look, Misaki's right there, alive, right over there…*

"And then, one student after another popped up in support. *It's true, Misaki's not dead, Misaki's alive, Right over there…* It spread through the room like a chain reaction.

"No one wanted to believe it. They couldn't accept the fact that the most popular person in the class had suddenly died like that. It's not like we can't understand how they felt. But…the problem was, they kept **this thing** going after that, too."

"What do you mean?" I opened my mouth for the first time since she'd begun her tale. "What **thing**?"

"Everyone in the class, from then on, started **pretending** that the kid was still alive. The head teacher helped, too. The teacher told them, *Absolutely, Misaki isn't dead. Misaki's alive even now in this room, as a member of the class. So everyone needs to come together and do their best to make it to graduation day.* Stuff like that."

We'll all pitch in to help each other and make this last year of middle school a good one.

I don't know why, but the words of the teacher from twenty-six years ago, as recounted by Mei, crossed now with the speech Mr. Kubodera had made to introduce me to the class the morning I started school.

All of us are going to do our part. So that next year in March…

"In the end, everyone in third-year Class 3 played out the rest of their middle school lives that way. They left the desk of the dead

student exactly how it had been and would talk to the kid, or horse around with them, or go home from school with them…Of course, it was all just **pretend.** And when it was time for graduation, the principal arranged for there to be a special seat for that student."

"Is this a true story?" I asked, unable to hold back any longer. "It's not some kind of rumor or legend?"

Mei did not reply. She simply continued telling the story coolly.

"After the graduation, they took the class photo in their classroom. With everyone in the class and the head teacher. But as it happened, when they looked at the developed photo later, everyone noticed something."

Mei paused for the slightest of moments, and then said: "In one corner of the group photo they saw that student, who couldn't possibly have been there. With a face pale as a corpse and smiling like everyone else."

So it was more like a legend after all. Maybe it was one of the "Seven Mysteries" of North Yomi. Though it was a pretty elaborate story, if so.

Even as I thought these things, for whatever reason, I couldn't just laugh it off. I tried to force myself to smile, but my cheeks just wound up twitching.

Mei had been expressionless throughout.

Her gaze still fixed, she pressed her lips together and her shoulders slowly lifted and fell a few times…before she finally added, in a voice like a whisper, "That kid—the one who died—was

named Misaki."

Now that was a sucker punch.

"Misaki?" My voice was unintentionally shrill. "Was that…their last name? Their first name? Was it a boy or a girl?"

"Hm-m-m."

Did she not know? Or she knew, but wasn't going to tell me? Her lack of expression as she inclined her head slightly told me nothing.

"Apparently there are some versions where the name is 'Masaki,' but they're the minority. I think it really was 'Misaki.'"

…Twenty-six years ago.

Deep inside, I mulled over what Mei had just told me.

Twenty-six years ago, there had been a popular kid named Misaki in third-year Class 3…

…Hold on.

Hold it right there.

That was when the idea hit me.

If it was twenty-six years ago, then maybe my mom—my mother, who had died fifteen years ago—wouldn't Ritsuko have been in middle school then? In which case she might have…

I don't know if Mei noticed the slight change in my reaction. She leaned back against the sofa again and, her tone unchanged, she told me, "There's more to this story, actually."

"There is?"

“You could say the part I just told you is like the prologue.”

And then—

A vibrant, electronic noise started up inside my bag, which was resting on the sofa. I was getting a call on my cell phone. I guess I’d forgotten to set it to vibrate.

“Oh, sorry.”

I quickly reached out for my bag and pulled my phone out. The screen displayed a notice reading: “Yomiyama—Grandma & Grandpa.”

“Ah, Koichi?”

Just as I had expected, I heard my grandmother’s voice.

“Where are you? It’s so late…”

“Uh, I’m sorry, Grandma. I got sidetracked on my way home from school…Yeah, I’m coming home now…How do I feel? I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

I hung up hastily, and then noticed that the vanished string music had started playing again. *Hey now*, I thought and turned around. I don’t know when she’d come back, but the old woman was at the table by the entrance. She was facing this way, but her eyes were hidden by the dark lenses of her glasses, so I still couldn’t see them.

“What an awful machine.”

Mei was looking down at my hand, her eyebrows knit in disgust.

“No matter where you are, you’re connected. They can catch you.”

Then she stood up from the sofa and walked away toward the back stairs without another word…What? Was she going back to that room in the basement?

Should I go after her? But if I went after her and found she was gone…hey, what's wrong with you? What a stupid thing to think. That couldn't happen. Obviously it couldn't. So…but no…

As I hesitated, the old woman spoke in a thick voice.

"I'm closing up soon. You go on home for today."

Chapter 5

May IV

1

May 25	**(M)**
1st Period	English
2nd Period	Social Studies
1st Period	Math
May 26	**(Tu)**
1st Period	Science
2nd Period	Language Arts

It was the end of May—which usually meant midterm exams at school. They were spread over two days next week, Monday and Tuesday, and only for the five major subjects.

Caught up in the scramble of moving, hospitalization, and switching schools, some part of my mind had been numbed to this most mundane of events. This made me realize that.

About two weeks had passed since I started school here, and my initial nervousness had eased considerably. But I still hadn't completely adjusted to the new group to which I now belonged. There were a few people I could chat or joke around with, and the pace, I guess, or the rhythms of this school had slowly soaked in, although they were hugely different from my old school. At this rate, I even felt as though I could probably make it to March next year without too much hassle. But then…

In the midst of it all, still, there was something that nagged at me.

The alienness that surrounded the existence of Mei Misaki, that resisted all attempts to unambiguously grasp its nature. Like a single, relentlessly echoing discordant note in the peaceful, inoffensive melody that was daily life at this school.

"When midterms are over, it'll be straight into a week of guidance counseling," Teshigawara moaned and ground his hands in his bleached hair. "The whole time, I'm gonna have to talk to the teachers all seriously about it, too. It's gonna be total misery."

"You'll be fine," Kazami, who was with him, flippantly replied. "Over ninety-five percent of people get into high school nowadays. Don't worry, I'm sure there's a school you can get into, too."

"That's supposed to cheer me up?"

"That's how I meant it."

"You're saying I'm stupid."

"I told you, I'm not."

"Hmph. Well, in any case, our old ties are only gonna last until graduation, I guess. I wish you all the best."

Teshigawara was waving at the "honor-roll-esque" boy he'd known since childhood, as if bidding him farewell for the rest of their lives. Then he looked at me.

"What are you gonna do for high school, Sakaki? You going back to Tokyo?"

"Yeah. My dad's coming back from India next spring and all."

“Some private school?” Kazami asked.

“Yeah, probably.”

“Must be nice being a college professor’s kid. Wish I could go to high school in Tokyo.”

Teshigawara was needling like always, but his tone was frank and didn’t sound sarcastic for once, so it wasn’t unpleasant.

“You probably get a free ride to college with your dad’s massive connections, huh, Sakaki?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” I countered immediately, but his taunt wasn’t entirely off the mark. After all…

The director of K*** Middle School, where I’d gone in Tokyo, had gone to the same college and been in the same research department as my dad, who’d had a mentor/underclassman relationship with him, on top of being close friends. So, given that, when I’d had to transfer, they’d made special arrangements predicated on my returning to Tokyo next year. Which means that even though I’m in a public school out here for a year, when it’s time for my high school exams, I’ll be able to take the tests to move up internally, from K*** Middle School to K*** High School. So I was told.

I had zero intention of telling anyone this. Because there’s no way anyone would think it was very funny if they found out…

This was after school on Wednesday, May 20.

After sixth period ended, we’d somehow ended up leaving the classroom together and were walking down the hall side by side. It

was raining outside, just as it had been all day.

"That reminds me. How do you guys do your school trip here?"

When I asked that, Teshigawara frowned. "Seriously? We went last year. To Tokyo. I went up Tokyo Tower for the first time on that trip. We went to Odaiba, too. You ever done that, Sakaki? Gone up Tokyo Tower?"

I hadn't, but…

"Last year? But isn't it usually third-years who go on school trips?"

"At North Yomi, we go in the fall of second year. I heard the third-years used to go sometime in May a long time ago, though."

"Used to?"

"Uh…yeah. Right, Kazami?"

"Uh, right. That's what they say."

For some reason, I felt a faint reluctance in their reaction. I pretended nothing had happened and asked, "Why did they change it to second year?"

"How should I know? That was a long time ago." Teshigawara's response was too rough. "They probably had their reasons."

"They probably also wanted to be considerate and do it before people had to start worrying about exams," Kazami replied. He stopped walking, took off his glasses, and started to clean the lenses.

"Huh. I didn't know public school was like that."

I stopped walking when Kazami did and went over to a window in the hall to look out. We were on the third floor. The rain was falling in a sprinkle now; you couldn't even see it unless you squinted, and more than half of the students walking through the schoolyard weren't using umbrellas.

I don't hate the rain.

I was reminded of what Mei had said, whatever day that was.

My favorite is the cold rain in the middle of winter. The moment it changes to snow.

I hadn't seen her yesterday or today. She'd been here on Monday, but I hadn't been able to find a chance to really talk to her. Maybe because I was strangely overthinking how we'd run into each other in the doll gallery in Misaki last week. Thinking about every last word she'd said that day. Every little movement she'd made. Every single element of her behavior…

And when she'd told me that "the story of the Misaki twenty-six years ago" was "kind of like a prologue," that had really stuck with me. I was pretty much convinced this was another one of the "Seven Mysteries," but still. *"There's more."* What was the ghost story that came after that?

Speaking of which, the week before last, hadn't Teshigawara mentioned something about "the curse of Class 3" after art class?

"Hey."

I tried to maintain a casual air as I broached the subject with these guys.

“Do you guys know the story of the third-year Class 3 from twenty-six years ago?”

That same instant, Kazami and Teshigawara both reacted with bald shock. Their faces seemed to go white in a second.

“C-c’mon, Sakaki…I thought you didn’t believe in stories like that?”

“Where did you…who told you that?”

After a moment’s thought, I decided not to bring Mei’s name up.

“I just heard a rumor.”

When I told them that, Kazami pressed in on me, his face serious. “How much did you hear?”

“What? Just the intro, I guess.”

Their hypersensitive reactions had been way more than I’d expected, and I faltered.

“I heard there was a popular student in third-year Class 3 twenty-six years ago and that they died suddenly…That’s about it.”

“So just the first year, then,” Kazami murmured, looking over at Teshigawara. Teshigawara pursed his lips, conflicted.

“What’s going on? You three look so serious.”

A voice interrupted. It was Ms. Mikami, who happened to be passing by just then. Yukari Sakuragi was tagging along beside her, I guess getting her advice on something.

“Oh. Uh, well, you know…”

Talking to Ms. Mikami face-to-face in a situation like this was something I was still not used to. I was terrible at it. As I fumbled for a response, Kazami took a step toward the teacher, as if to silence me. Then he theatrically lowered his voice and told her, "Sakakibara says he heard a rumor…about *the year when it started*."

"I see."

Ms. Mikami nodded slowly, then tilted her head to one side. Her reaction, too, seemed somehow odd for this situation. As for Sakuragi, she clearly couldn't control her shock when she heard that, either, just like Kazami and Teshigawara.

"That's a difficult issue…" Without so much as a glance in my direction. A deeply thoughtful look on her face, the first I had ever seen like it on her. Her voice smothered, discernible only in snatches, Ms. Mikami murmured, "…not sure. But…as little as you can…now we really…okay? Let's keep an eye on…"

2

"Do you remember twenty-six years ago, Grandma?" I asked my grandmother immediately after getting home from school that day.

She was with my grandfather, sitting together in wicker chairs on the porch and looking out at the garden after the long rain. She didn't even have time to finish saying "Welcome home" before she was blinking at the question tossed at her from her grandchild.

"Eh? That's quite a while ago. Twenty-six years ago, you said?"

“Yeah. My mom was around my age. I think she was in her third year at North Yomi.”

“When Ritsuko was in her third year of middle school…”

My grandmother rested a hand against her cheek and leaned against the armrest of her chair.

“Oh, yes. The head teacher for her class was a handsome young man…He taught social studies and supervised the theater club or something along those lines. He was quite the fired-up educator. I believe the students thought well of him.”

She pieced her story together slowly, her eyes narrowed, as if she were gazing at something far off in the distance. Beside her, my grandfather nodded his head mechanically.

“Which class was my mom in when she was a third-year?”

“Which class? Oh, my.”

My grandmother cast a sideways glance at my grandfather, and then let out a low, soft sigh at the sight of him still nodding his head so mechanically.

“In her third year, let’s see, she would have been in Class 2 or 3… Yes, I think it was Class 3.”

No way. Her reply left me speechless; I just felt weird. It wasn’t acceptance. It wasn’t surprise, either, and it wasn’t as extreme as fear. But I felt as if I had suddenly spotted a huge black pit, with no bottom to be seen, right where I’d been about to step.

“Third-year Class 3? You’re sure?”

“When you say that, I don’t feel so sure anymore.”

My grandfather was bobbing his head in time to my grandmother’s voice.

“Do you still have her yearbook?”

“I don’t think we’d have that here. If there is one, I would imagine it’s at your father’s house. When she got married, I think she took all that sort of thing with her.”

“Oh.”

I wondered if my father still had stuff like that at home. At least, I never remembered being shown any of it.

“So then, Grandma.” I continued with my questions. “Twenty-six years ago, when my mom was in third year, in Class 3, did a kid in her class die in an accident or anything like that?”

“An accident? With one of the children in her class…?”

My grandmother looked over to check on my grandfather once again; then her eyes sought refuge in the garden. Finally she let out a slow sigh.

“I seem to recall that there was, now that you mention it,” she answered as if to herself, half in reflection. “I can’t remember what sort of an accident it was, though. What a good child. It was terrible, when that happened…”

“What was the kid’s name?” I was more aggressive than I meant to be. “Was it Misaki?”

“…I really don’t know.”

Once again, my grandmother's gaze fled anxiously to the garden.

"Misaki. Misaki," My grandfather murmured in his age-wracked voice.

"Good morning. Good morning." The mynah bird, Ray, had been well behaved up till then, but now she suddenly spoke up in her shrill voice, startling me. "Good morning, Ray. Good morning."

"I suppose Reiko would remember much better than I do," my grandmother said.

"But Reiko was only three or four years old back then, wasn't she?"

She must have been, considering the age difference between the two sisters. Then my grandmother's expression abruptly shifted into a confident cast and she nodded deeply to herself. "Yes, yes. Ritsuko was taking her high school entrance exams. I was still looking after Reiko. That was a tough year! Grandpa was all work-work-work and never helped out at all."

My grandmother fixed a scrutinizing eye on my grandfather. "Isn't that right?" His lips were moving, like a drawstring purse, in pinched mumbles.

"Why? Why?" Ray asked in her high-pitched voice. "Why? Ray, why?"

It was pretty late at night when Reiko came home. She'd had dinner out. She looked as if she'd had a good amount of alcohol with it. I recognized the smell and her eyes were a little bloodshot, too.

"You think you're going to ace the midterms next week?"

After collapsing onto the sofa in the living room, she seemed to have noticed that I was in the room with her and so turned this sudden question on me. She sounded as if she was slurring her words ever so slightly. She wasn't all the way to "drunk," but this was the first time I'd seen Reiko even this bad.

"No way." My confusion brought out an honest answer. "I'm still studying for them, as much as I have to."

"Well, excuse me."

She chortled softly, then drained the glass of cool water my grandmother had brought her. As I watched her, all at once I—

I pictured how my dead mother must have had alcohol and gotten drunk like this long ago, too. The thought sent a rush through my heart and, in the same moment, I felt my chest squeezing tighter.

"Ah-h-h, today wiped me *out*."

Reiko stretched out grandiosely from her seat on the couch. She turned her eyes, almost wistful, on me.

"It's tough being an adult. All these people wanting to spend time with you, **holding you back**. And then…"

"How are you, Reiko?" My grandmother walked over, her head cocked, looking worried. "You don't usually get like this."

“That’s it for tonight. It’s bed for me. I’ll shower after I get up tomorrow. Good night.”

Reiko was getting unsteadily to her feet, but I screwed up my courage and called out to stop her. I needed to find out what had happened twenty-six years ago as soon as I could.

“…You know the story, don’t you, Reiko? About what happened twenty-six years ago?”

She’d just lifted herself from the sofa, but now fell heavily back onto it.

“Yeah. They’ve told that story forever.”

“Is it one of the ‘Seven Mysteries’?”

“This is on a different level.”

“Did you find out about it after you started middle school, too, Reiko?”

“Yup. Not from any particular person, though, just from rumors.”

“When my mom was in her third year at middle school, she was in the Class 3 from the story. Did you know about that?”

“…After.” Reiko brushed her bangs away from her face and slowly leaned back to stare at the ceiling. “Ritsuko told me about that later. But…”

“What’s the rest of the story?”

Riding my momentum, I peppered her with questions, hoping. But that made Reiko’s face harden and she quickly buttoned up. A long

moment later, she said, “I don’t know that, Koichi.”

Her voice was several pitches lower.

“You do know, Reiko.”

She said nothing.

“Reiko, c’m—”

“People have added a lot of embellishments to that story.”

I heard a sigh and turned around to find my grandmother sitting at the dining room table, her hands covering her face. It was a pose that suggested she had been struggling not to see or hear our conversation.

“Maybe it would be best if you don’t think about it for now,” Reiko said at last. She stood up, stretched her back, then looked straight at me. She’d gone back to her usual relaxed tone that I knew so well. “There’s a time for finding out about some things. And maybe once you miss your chance, sometimes you’re better off not knowing. At least, until the next chance comes along.”

4

The next day, Thursday, I didn’t see Mei Misaki all day.

Exams were coming up soon…Was she all right?

I didn’t know how good Mei was at school or how her grades were. In fact, I had never once seen her called on in class to read from the book or solve a problem. But more importantly, if she kept

being out all the time, her attendance might not be good enough to graduate.

Though I had a feeling that if I expressed that concern to her, she would probably snap back, “Is that your business?”

I considered trying to get in touch with her. But then I realized that I still hadn’t received a class list or anything like that since transferring here. So there was no way for me to find out her phone number or where she lived. Though I had to admit, that would be easy enough to find out if I really wanted to…

She probably lived near that doll shop—I mean, the doll gallery. And she probably went over there occasionally to look at the dolls, like she had that day. Yes. I was convinced of it.

What are her parents like? I wondered.

Does she have a close friend somewhere?

How did her left eye, the one she kept behind that eye patch, get that way? Maybe she just wasn’t that sturdy, physically. There were reasons to think so. That could be why she always sat out of gym, and why she was out of school so much…Ah, but maybe…

…And on, and on.

I continued to rack my brain, but I was the only one in the class doing it—I never saw anything to suggest otherwise. Although I suppose nothing was going to come of my ruminations right now anyway…

In the midst of all this—

After lunch, when we were heading to Building Zero—where the art studio was—for fifth-period art class, I casually turned and looked up at the roof of the school building and spotted her.

It was almost exactly like that time I'd been sitting out of gym class, in the shade of a tree by the field, on my first day at school two weeks ago. A figure standing alone, right behind the iron railing that circled the roof.

I was heading over with Mochizuki, the Munch aficionado, but all I told him was "Give me a second" before I left him behind and ran back into the iron-ribbed school building we had just come out of—Building C. I sprinted up the stairs and pushed open the cream-colored steel door leading to the roof without a moment's hesitation.

But just then—

As it happened, I had slipped my cell phone into an inside pocket on my school uniform that day, and it started vibrating, groaning dully. What the…? Who could that be? At this precise moment? Why would anyone…?

I burst through the door and scanned the area for Mei as I pulled out my phone and put it to my ear. It was Teshigawara calling.

"You okay?"

"What? Why are you calling me?"

"I'm calling 'cause I thought you might be in trouble. Akazawa's pretty wound up. She might start having some kind of hysterical episode."

"Meaning what? Why does Akazawa care?"

“Look, Sakaki…”

Hhshssshhshshh…Hissing obscured his voice in a sandstorm of noise. I didn’t think the two things were related, but just then a fierce wind gusted across the roof, howling.

“…Okay? I’m not trying to give you a hard time here.”

I could barely make out Teshigawara’s voice, surfacing between the sound of the wind and the interference.

“Got it, Sakaki? Quit paying attention to **things that aren’t there**. It’s dangerous.”

…What?

What was he saying?

“Plus…You listening? Hey, Sakaki!”

“Yeah.”

“That story you were talking about yesterday, from twenty-six years ago…Is that bothering you?”

“I mean…”

“I talked to someone about it after that. Once we get to June, I’ll tell you about it. So for the rest of this month, could you…”

Hshssshhshshh, kksshhkkshhkk…The interference got ten times worse and the call dropped with a *bztt*.

What had that been about? I could hardly understand what was happening. I was more than a little irritated, so I turned my phone off and shoved it back into my pocket so he couldn’t reach me even if he

called back. My eyes swept every corner of the roof where the wind still blustered fiercely…

But there was no one there.

5

The next day, Mei showed up in the classroom, as normal.

However, I wasn't able to say a single word to her. It wasn't that Teshigawara's call the day before had me worried. No, I don't think so. It was just that somehow, in her silence, she seemed to be denying me any contact.

I hadn't said a word to Teshigawara, either, after that. There was so much I wanted to get out of him, but—and maybe he was avoiding that questioning—he never came near me. Seriously, what was going on here?

Tomorrow was the fourth Saturday of the month, so there was no school again. I had an outpatient appointment at the municipal hospital, but there hadn't been any major changes in my condition, so I was considering canceling it and rescheduling for next week. I doubt my grandmother would nag much if I did that. Midterms were starting first thing next week, too. The best thing to do was probably to get some studying in. I kind of did think I'd ace the exams, but to be honest, I'm a pretty big chicken…or maybe just an enormously serious student.

…And so.

Fighting back the desire to check out the doll gallery in the town of Misaki again, I spent the weekend nights secluded at home and didn't go anywhere.

I got two calls on my cell phone.

The first was from a faraway Hindu nation.

Like last time, my father, Yosuke, kept exclaiming, "Sure is hot here!" but basically he was checking up on me: "Have you been all right since then?" When I told him that midterms were coming up soon, he came back with "Don't stress yourself too much over them." Considering I was totally incapable of not stressing over them, though, that advice made me wonder whether this man understood his son's personality at all.

The next person who called me caught me a little by surprise. It was Ms. Mizuno, from the municipal hospital.

"Staying healthy?"

Since that was the first thing she said, I knew who it was right away. At the same time, a faint nervousness hit me.

"You remember that thing from before—I guess it was two weeks ago now—about that girl? The one who passed away at the end of April, in the inpatient ward?"

"Yes, of course."

"I kept thinking about her after we talked, and I checked into something. When I did, I found out her name really was Misaki, not Masaki."

“Was Misaki her last name? Or—?”

“No, it was her first name.”

So it wasn’t the same as Mei Misaki. Which meant what?

“How did she write it?”

“With the characters for ‘future’ and ‘flowers blooming’—to make Misaki.”

“Misaki…”

“Her last name was Fujioka.”

Misaki Fujioka, eh?

I couldn’t help falling into deep thought over it.

What made Misaki Fujioka “half my body” to Mei Misaki? What could it be?

“Why did you want to know about her?” Ms. Mizuno asked me. “You did promise you’d tell me.”

“Oh, uh…about that.”

“You don’t have to tell me right this second. But sometime.”

“Okay.”

“By the way, Horror Boy. What are you reading recently?”

And so she dropped the talk about promises just like that. As I was responding, “Oh, uh,” my eyes fell to the book right next to me. “Um, volume two of the paperback version of *Lovecraft: the Complete Works*.”

“Oho,” I heard her say in her normal tone. “How very refined of you! Aren’t you about to start midterms at your middle school?”

“You know, it’s just for breaks in studying,” I replied. But considering the amount of time I spent on each, the truth was exactly the opposite: I was studying a little bit during breaks in reading the book.

“You’re so responsible, Horror Boy,” Ms. Mizuno said, sounding amused. “I wish my little brother would learn from your example. He doesn’t care about reading at all, let alone horror. His head’s only got room for basketball. We usually don’t have anything to talk about, even though we’re brother and sister.”

“You have a little brother?”

“Two of them. The basketball boy is in the same exact school year as you.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that.”

“My other brother’s a second-year in high school, but he’s another musclehead obsessed with exercise. I don’t know if he’s ever read anything that wasn’t a comic book. Quite a problem, no?”

“I guess.”

I had a feeling that the fifteen-year-old reading the Cthulhu mythology alone in his room on the weekend was more of a problem, but…whatever, I guess.

Actually—that made me realize something.

Wasn’t there a boy in my class named Mizuno? He was tall and

really tan and had a sporty look. I'd never talked to him, but could he be Ms. Mizuno's youngest brother?

It was a small town. This kind of coincidence might not be so unusual.

"Um, Ms. Mizuno…did you go to North Yomi for middle school, too?" I posed the question to her, suddenly concerned.

"I was at South Middle," she replied. "My house is right on the border between the two schools, so depending on what year it is, we go to north or south. So my first brother and I went to South Middle, and my youngest brother is going to North Middle."

…I see.

Then Ms. Mizuno probably wouldn't know about the Misaki from twenty-six years ago.

I felt relieved somehow, and the two of us went on with our frivolous conversation about our shared hobby.

6

May 26, Tuesday.

The second day of first-semester midterm exams.

Rain had been falling steadily since the night before, threatening the start of the rainy season. I thought it was pretty unusual for a school nowadays (and this was my first experience of it), but North Yomi didn't require indoor-only shoes. Except for the gymnasium,

everyone kept their outside shoes on, even inside the school building. So on days like this when it rained, the floors in the hall and the classrooms became a mess of wet footprints.

In second period, the proctor for the language arts exam, our last subject, was Mr. Kubodera.

He passed out the exam papers; then, with the directive, "All right, you may start," the room fell silent. The sound of mechanical pencils tracing over paper was enhanced by an occasional restrained cough or a low sigh. I may have changed schools, but the atmosphere during a test was the same everywhere.

After about thirty minutes had passed since the start of the test, a student got up from their desk and left the classroom. I reacted to the sound and to some impression they'd made, and reflexively I looked over toward the window. Mei wasn't there. *Geez, she finished early and left again, huh?*

After a bit of internal debate, I put my answer sheet facedown on my desk and got up from my chair. I started to leave the room silently, when—

"Finished already, Sakakibara?"

Mr. Kubodera stopped me.

I lowered my voice a shade. "Yes. So I was going to…"

"Don't you think you should use the rest of the time to check over your answers?"

"No. That's okay."

I was conscious of a low buzzing that had sprung up here and there in the room as I answered.

"I'm confident in my answers. May I leave?"

I looked over at the door Mei had so recently opened and shut. Mr. Kubodera was at a loss for a moment, but finally he lowered his gaze. "I suppose so. You may leave the room, but don't go home. Just wait quietly somewhere. We're having an unscheduled homeroom after this."

The buzzing spread through the whole classroom. I could feel everyone's eyes flicking toward me to an uncomfortable degree.

They were probably thinking I was a snob. And if they did, they did: there was nothing I could do about it. And yet…

I couldn't help cocking my head to one side and wondering why.

We'd done exactly the same thing, so why had it turned out this way for me, but no one said anything to Mei? Wasn't that pretty odd? Now it really did seem as though something was…

The second I came out of the classroom, I saw Mei standing beside a window in the hallway. The window was open and a little bit of rain was blowing in. She was staring outside blankly, not paying it the least attention.

"You always finish early," I said, walking over to her.

"Do I?" Mei replied without turning around.

"Both days, you left the room halfway through the test time for all of the subjects."

“Are you saying you came to keep me company for the last one?”

“No…I’m good at language arts.”

“Huh. You could answer those questions, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“Where you have to summarize whatever in a certain number of words, or where it asks what the author’s objective was.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess so.”

“I suck at those. I hate them. I’d much rather do math or science. Those only have one clear answer.”

Ah, yeah. I could see what she was getting at.

“So you just wrote down whatever and left?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that…okay?”

“Yeah, I don’t care.”

“Uh, but what about…”

I started to say something, but I decided to abandon the subject.

Leading the way, I moved over to the top of the stairs adjacent to the eastern side of the classroom—called the “East Stair.” Mei opened the window there, too. The breeze that blew in, sprinkled with drops of rain, played through her black bobbed haircut.

“Her name was Misaki Fujioka, wasn’t it? The girl who died at the hospital that day.”

I boldly presented the information I'd gotten from Ms. Mizunc over the weekend. Her eyes never turned from the window, but Mei's shoulders trembled ever so slightly—or seemed to.

"Why her?"

"Fujioka Misaki…," Mei began to speak softly. "Misaki Fujioka was my…**cousin**. A long time ago, we were together more and she was more than that."

"More than that?"

I had trouble understanding what she meant. But…was that why she was her "half her body"?

"That story you told me two weeks ago."

I changed the subject yet again.

"About the third-year Class 3 twenty-six years ago. How does the rest of it go? The ghost story part?"

"Did you try asking someone?" she shot back. As I searched for some sort of response, Mei turned to face me and said, "No one would tell you?"

"Uh, no."

"Well, what can you do?"

That was all she said before clamming up again and turning back to the window.

Even if I asked her for **the story** now, she probably wouldn't tell me anything. That was the feeling I got. Reiko's words, that "there's

a time for finding out about some things," came back to me with a strange weight.

"Um…look," I said, then took a deep breath, just as I had at the doll gallery. I walked up to stand beside Mei, who stood next to the window. "Look, I've wanted to ask you this for a while now. It's been bugging me ever since I transferred here."

I thought I saw her shoulders tremble slightly again. I pressed on.

"Why do they do that? Everyone in class, and even the teachers. It's like you're not…"

Without letting me finish my question, Mei replied in a murmur, "Because *I don't exist.*"

Got it, Sakaki? Quit paying attention to ***things that aren't there.***

"That doesn't…"

I took another deep breath.

It's dangerous.

"But that doesn't…"

"To them, I'm invisible. You're the only one who sees me, Sakakibara…what would you do then?"

Mei turned her face slowly toward me. A shadow of a smile flashed in her right eye, the one unobscured by the eye patch. Was it my imagination that made me see a tinge of loneliness there?

"No…that can't be true."

If I closed my eyes then, and opened them, say, three seconds

later, would she have disappeared right in front of me? For a moment, such thoughts had control of me and I hastily shifted my gaze away to the world beyond the window. “It can’t be true…”

That was when it happened. I heard the sound of someone bolting up the stairs.

7

The footsteps were frantic, completely out of place in this situation, with the entire school wrapped up in test-taking. Even as I wondered what was going on, I saw who it was—a figure wearing a navy blue sweat suit.

It was Mr. Miyamoto, one of the gym teachers. I was still sitting out of gym classes, but I knew the name of the head teacher and what he looked like, at least.

Mr. Miyamoto came toward us and opened his mouth to say something, but in the end ran up to the Class 3 classroom without a word. Then he opened the door at the front of the classroom and called in, “Mr. Kubodera! Mr. Kubodera, could you come over here?”

After a moment, the language arts teacher—who was in the middle of supervising a test—stuck his head out from the classroom. “What’s going on?”

His shoulders heaving with his ragged breathing, the gym teacher said, “Well.” Where Mei and I were, I could just barely hear what he

said.

"We just got the news…"

…And that was all I heard. He had lowered his voice partway through.

Mr. Kubodera's reaction when he heard Mr. Miyamoto's news, though, I could interpret clearly. As soon as he heard whatever it was, he became speechless and his face stiffened.

"I see," he replied solemnly, then went back into the room. Mr. Miyamoto looked up at the ceiling, his shoulders still heaving badly.

Finally—

The door Mr. Kubodera had shut was flung open and a student came flying out of the room.

It was the class representative, Yukari Sakuragi. She had her bag in her right hand. She looked to be in complete turmoil.

She shared a few brief words with Mr. Miyamoto, who stood near the door, then Sakuragi grabbed her umbrella from the stand outside the classroom. It was a beige stick umbrella. Then, her legs tangling, she started to run…

At first, she headed toward the East Stair. But then, who can say why, that impulse was checked and she seemed frozen in place. It seemed to happen the instant her eyes locked on us, standing by the windows in front of the staircase.

The next moment, she had spun around on her heel and started running down the hall in the opposite direction. It looked as though

her right leg, which she told me she'd twisted after a fall, still hadn't healed completely. Her run was awkward, trying to favor it.

She ran off down the hallway that ran east to west and soon disappeared from my view. She'd gone down the West Stair on the other side of the building.

"I wonder what that was about." I turned back to Mei. "What do you…?"

Mei didn't react in the slightest. She stood frozen, her face ashen. I moved away from the window toward the sweat-suited gym teacher and tried asking him.

"Um, Mr. Miyamoto? What's going on with Sakuragi?"

"Huh? Oh…" Mr. Miyamoto looked at me with a grimace on his face, as if scowling at me. "Her family was in an accident. We just got an urgent message for her to go to the hospital right away."

I wasn't sure whether he was finished or not when it happened—there was some kind of violent sound and a short, shrill scream echoed up the hall.

What was that?

Immediately, I felt intensely unsettled.

What just happened?

I started running down the hall before I could give it much thought. As if I were chasing after Yukari Sakuragi, who had just run down this same hallway.

I bounded down the West Stair, the same she'd gone down, to the

second floor. I didn't see her there. I started to run from the second floor down to the first…and instantly I saw it.

A bizarre, horrifying scene filled my vision.

At the bottom of the wet concrete staircase, at the landing between the second and first floors, was an open umbrella. A beige stick umbrella. The one Yukari Sakuragi had just taken out of the umbrella stand. And draped over the top of it, Sakuragi herself had fallen, facedown.

"Wh-what…"

Her head lay over the center of the open umbrella. Both of her legs were still two or three steps up from the bottom. Her hands were thrown out at different angles in front of her. Her bag had tumbled into a corner of the landing.

…What had happened?

What could have possibly…?

It was hard to comprehend at first sight. But right away, I could get a general idea.

In her upheaval after learning of her family's emergency, she had flown from the classroom in a scramble and her foot had slipped partway down the stairs between the first and second floors. The umbrella she'd had in her hand had flown out in front of her. The impact of hitting the ground had made it open, and it fell onto the landing. The metal spike at the top end had landed pointing exactly in her direction. And then…

She had radically lost her balance, and the force of her fall had

brought her toppling **right onto it**. As if she'd been floating through the air. Unable to do so much as turn her head or put her hands up.

Sakuragi's body didn't move at all as she lay there. A nauseating red color was eating away at the beige of the open umbrella, spreading across it. That was blood. A huge amount of blood…

"Sakuragi…?" I called out to her, my voice shaking. My legs trembled as I climbed down the stairs.

Making my way fearfully down to the landing, my eyes fell on a new horror.

The tip of the umbrella had skewered Yukari Sakuragi's throat, crushing it, sinking all the way to the base. Profuse amounts of fresh blood gushed from the wound.

"How…"

I turned my eyes away, overwhelmed by the sight.

"How could this…?"

I heard a sudden *fwump* as Sakuragi's body rolled to one side. The shaft of the umbrella that had miraculously—no—that had, through balance born of an evil coincidence, so far supported her weight now snapped.

"Hey!"

A loud voice came from overhead.

"What happened? Is everyone all right?!"

It was Mr. Miyamoto. Behind him were other people, teachers

who must have come out of the nearby classrooms.

"It's bad. Call an ambulance!" Mr. Miyamoto shouted as he dashed down the stairs. "And call the nurse's office right now. Urk—this is awful. How could something like this—hey, are you all right?"

I nodded, "Yes." That's what I meant to say, anyway, but all that came out of my mouth was a groan. A sharp pain lanced through my chest. *Ah—this terrible pain, this is…*

"I-I'm sorry."

Putting both hands to my chest, I fell up against a wall.

"I don't…feel so…"

"I'll handle this. Go to the bathroom," Mr. Miyamoto ordered me. I guess he mistook this as me fighting back the urge to puke.

I had started tottering up the stairs when I saw Mei in the hallway on the second floor. She was standing behind the teachers, looking intently down at us.

Her face was ashen to the point of death. Her right eye was wide to the point of popping. Like the doll inside the black coffin in the basement display room at "Blue Eyes Empty to All, in the Twilight of Yomi," her slightly open lips seemed about to make some appeal…

For what?

What is it that you would ask?

Mere seconds later, when I'd made it back to the hall on the

second floor, however, she was no longer there.

8

The accident involving Yukari Sakuragi's family had been a car accident. The car her mother, Mieko, was riding in had crashed. Sakuragi's aunt was at the wheel, and her mother was riding in the passenger seat. The cause wasn't clear, but while driving down a two-lane road along an embankment on the Yomiyama River, the car had lost its brakes and crashed into a tree beside the road.

The car was totaled. Both women were in serious condition when they reached the hospital. Her mother's injuries, in particular, did not allow much optimism. That was when the urgent call had come to the school.

Mr. Miyamoto had passed the message to Mr. Kubodera, who had told Sakuragi to get to the hospital quickly. He'd decided that she would take her test some other day.

Her mother was treated, but to no effect, and she passed away that night. Her aunt had barely pulled through. But according to what I heard later, she was in a coma for more than a week after the accident.

Sakuragi herself, who had met with that unbelievable misfortune in the West Stair of Building C, was taken to the hospital by ambulance, but on the way there she passed away from the blood loss and shock. I found this out later, too, but she had just turned fifteen two days earlier.

That was how Yukari Sakuragi and her mother, Mieko, became “the deaths of May” for third-year Class 3 at Yomiyama North Middle School that year, in 1998.

Interlude I

…Someone in third-year Class 3 died.

Yeah, it was a huge deal.

They said she slipped on the stairs in Building C and she landed badly…

No, that's not what happened.

It's not? Then what was it?

I heard that when she fell on the stairs, she threw her umbrella in front of her and the tip of it went through her throat.

Eek!

I heard another story that said she got stabbed through the eye, though, not the throat.

Oh my gosh. Really?

Either way, it was such a gruesome scene that they put a gag order on the witnesses or something.

She was the class representative for the girls, right? The girl who died?

That's what I heard.

I heard that her mom died the exact same day, in a car accident.

Yeah. I heard that, too.

Hey, do you think this is **because of that curse**?

“That” curse? You mean you know about that?

Just what I’ve overheard. I don’t know the whole story.

They do call it “the curse of third-year Class 3.”

See?

But it’s dangerous to just go blabbing about it.

But secretly everyone knows the story, right? **How a popular kid from that class named Misaki died twenty-six years ago…**

Y-yeah…

And how this year is *one of those years*?

Could be.

That’s awful. What if I get put in Class 3 next year?

No use worrying about that now, is there?

But…

Why not transfer out while you’re still in second year?

Hm-m-m.

I mean, **it’s not like *it happens* every year. I think last year was an *off year*.**

What about the year before that? That year *it happened*.

The curse is capricious.

Once it starts, something bad happens to the class every month, right?

Yeah.

Someone dies.

Yeah. **Every month, at least one person with ties to the class…**

Not just the students?

Their families are in danger, too. Especially the immediate family. I heard more distant relatives are fine.

Wow. You sure know a lot about it.

There's an upperclassman in my kendo club named Maejima. He's in Class 3. He's been telling me about it on the sly lately. He acts like he doesn't really believe in it, so that's probably why he told *an outsider* like me about it.

Okay, so he doesn't believe it. But I mean, someone really did die…

Purely coincidence. Purely an unlucky accident. Curses are baloney…That's what he says.

Maybe he's right.

I have no idea. But really, I think the best thing you can do is to just stay away from that class.

Yeah?

How awful would that be, if we got sucked into that? God forbid. I mean, just talking to you about this stuff could be super dangerous. What should we do? What if…

Hey, cut it out.

Yeah. Let’s just drop it.

Chapter 6

June I

1

“You probably don’t have to worry much at this point.”

The aging lead physician gave his diagnosis in his usual breezy tone.

“From what I saw today, your condition has stabilized. You aren’t feeling any pain anymore, are you?”

“No.”

“Then there’s no problem with you going to school as normal.”

Even his crisp delivery of this news couldn’t wipe away my anxiety completely.

Still feeling fundamentally depressed, I took several deep breaths in front of the physician. Yeah, definitely no more ominous sensations in there. A slight difficulty breathing from the pain in my chest…a week earlier, the symptom had begun presenting again from time to time, but even that had vanished in the last two or three days.

“So then my gym class…?”

“Strenuous exercise is still out of the question. Let’s see how things are in a month. It may take longer.”

“Okay.”

“Just to be sure, I want you to come in again this weekend. If there don’t seem to be any changes, we’ll meet again in a month.”

I nodded, then lifted my eyes to the calendar that hung on the wall of the exam room. Yesterday had been the first day of June. This weekend—that would be Saturday the 6th.

When I witnessed Yukari Sakuragi's horrific accident on the second day of midterms—that had been exactly a week ago—the pain in my chest had arisen from the problem in my lungs. Just as the anxiety that flashed through my mind had warned me. I'd gone to the municipal hospital the next day to have it looked at, and received the unhappy diagnosis of "signs of a minor pneumothoracic event." However, they had also told me "It hasn't reached the stage of a second recurrence."

"Although there's a very tiny hole and a minor collapse, it appears that the surrounding tissue has healed. Thanks to that, you managed to stay in decent shape and avoid a deflation of the lung," the physician had explained. "You probably won't need any special treatment. Just get some rest at home."

And so, per the physician's orders—

Since I'd been shut up in my house all week, I hadn't been to school. So I had almost no idea what was happening in the class after the accident.

The barest of information that I'd gotten was that Sakuragi's mother, who'd been in a car accident, had died the same day. That the funeral for mother and daughter had been conducted quietly, for close relatives only. That, of course, everyone in class couldn't hide the intense shock they felt. That was about it.

I didn't know what Mei Misaki had been doing since then. I

wasn't utterly without means to find out, of course, but I didn't want to use **those means** on her or on the other issues. For some reason I felt an overriding hesitation and I lost my nerve.

I still didn't have a class list, so the only student I could call directly and feel out was Teshigawara, whose cell phone number I had. And him, I'd tried to call a couple times during the previous week, but he never once answered. Maybe he knew it was me calling and he wasn't picking up on purpose.

My grandmother had heard about the accident, but all she had done was effusively repeat "How frightening" or "I feel so bad for them." It seemed her concern lay completely with the health of her grandson. Whether or not my grandfather understood what was going on, he **bobbled** his head to every word my grandmother said. Reiko was incredibly concerned about my mental state, but she still wouldn't get into the subjects we'd touched on. I couldn't bring it up, either. The mynah bird Ray shrieked as energetically as ever. There wasn't so much as a peep from my dad in India and I hadn't told him any of the news yet, either.

In the midst of it all, there was, in fact, one person I could talk to relatively casually. Funnily enough, that was Ms. Mizuno from the municipal hospital. It was two days after Sakuragi's death that she called me, the day after I'd gone to the hospital, in the afternoon.

"Are you all right? How are your lungs?"

She cut right to the point.

"After all, you did see a horrible accident up close. That's going to have an effect on you, physically."

“You know about that?”

“I heard from my little brother. You know, my youngest brother who’s in the same class as you at North Middle? Takeru Mizuno. He’s on the basketball team.”

So that really was him.

“You came to the hospital instead of going to school yesterday, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Nothing bad enough to hospitalize you, I guess?”

“Thankfully, no. I managed to pull myself through it, they said.”

“When are you coming back? To the hospital, I mean.”

“Next week, Tuesday morning.”

“Okay, you want to get together after that?”

“Huh?”

Why…? Before I could say anything more, Ms. Mizuno went on. “Something’s been bothering me. All kinds of things. I don’t know what’s connected to what, or how, and what’s not connected at all. Plus there’s still that thing we need to talk about.”

That thing—about why I’d been asking all those questions about the girl who’d died at the hospital at the end of April?

“So now you’re convalescing at home?”

“I’m trying.”

“Don’t start brooding. If you do have to be hospitalized again, I’ll put everything I’ve got into taking care of you.”

“Uh…okay. Thank you.”

That’s what I told her, but I wanted to avoid that happening at any cost.

“Well, I’ll see you at the hospital on Tuesday, then. I’ll call you before that, though.”

Ms. Mizuno was being very considerate of my frame of mind, because she didn’t once start talking about our common interest. She hadn’t even called me “Horror Boy” like she always did, and deep down I was relieved.

I’d just witnessed real-life blood and gore two days earlier and, unsurprisingly, my emotions had suffered for it.

The nauseating red that had spread across the umbrella that day, the way Yukari Sakuragi had looked with the metal spike stabbed through her throat, the profuse amounts of fresh blood that had pumped out of her. It was all burned into my eyes and wouldn’t go away. The sound of the umbrella snapping and her body rolling onto its side, Mr. Miyamoto’s voice shouting, the siren on the ambulance, the screams and soft weeping of the students…All of it still lingered in my ears, raw.

As much as I tried to tell myself they were two separate things, I was taking a break from horror novels and horror movies for a little while—just then, in my state of mind, I genuinely couldn’t take it.

2

Rain was falling again, just like the week before. Apparently the rainy season had truly begun, much earlier than most years. As usual, my grandmother had offered to take me to the hospital in the car, but I had firmly refused and come to the hospital alone.

I had promised to meet Ms. Mizuno as soon as my checkup was over. She'd said that she had to work the night shift and she'd go straight from that to the dorm at the hospital to nap. We'd arranged that I would call her when I was done.

Standing near the front entrance to the outpatient area, I called Ms. Mizuno's cell phone, then spent the time while I waited gazing at the rain-soaked scenery outside.

It was then that I thought about how the rain in Yomiyama was clammier than in Tokyo.

Considering the pollutants in the air, the opposite was probably true. So it was just an issue with my perceptions.

Maybe the word "clammy" isn't exactly right. Maybe I should say something more neutral, like "it had a richer quality."

The walkways to the building, the ebb and flow of people, the plants in the foreground and the mountains in the distance…The rain drenching all of these things seemed to take on intrinsically different shades and elements for each. I certainly don't mean that it was dirty.

My eyes came to rest on the puddles that had collected on the

ground.

These were the same. How can I put it? They seemed to have more colors, and deeper colors, than the puddles in Tokyo. Perhaps the problem wasn't the rain itself, but the difference in the objects seen through it. Or maybe it really was nothing more than a mirror for the images in my mind.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

I heard a voice beside me. This was the first time I'd seen Ms. Mizuno without her white nurse's uniform. She wore a light blue shirt and a black denim jacket.

"How was your checkup?"

"It looks like I won't have to burden you, at least."

"That's too bad."

"I can go to school tomorrow, too."

"Oh yeah? That's great," she said with a sunny smile. She pulled her cell phone from a pocket of her denim jacket and glanced down at it. "It's a little early, but do you want to get lunch somewhere?"

"You were on the night shift, right?" I offered her the most basic level of courtesy. "I mean, you must be wiped out…"

"Oh, I'm fine! I'm off tomorrow, and I'm still plenty young. How do you feel about that restaurant over there?"

"Up to you."

Ms. Mizuno had driven over. She had a cute blue compact car, a

huge contrast to the rugged black car my grandmother drove around.

3

The restaurant chain was the same one we had in Tokyo, but the table we sat at was much roomier than the ones there. After we'd ordered, Ms. Mizuno put both hands to her mouth and yawned hugely. "Fwa-a-a-h!"

"You're not getting enough sleep, huh?"

"Hm? Well, that's par for the course."

"I'm sorry. We shouldn't have…"

"What are you talking about? I'm the one who said we should meet up. Don't worry about it."

Her coffee and sandwich finally came. Ms. Mizuno first dumped a bunch of sugar into the coffee, then took several sips before biting into her egg sandwich, at which point she murmured, "Let's get started then," and turned back to me.

"First off, I had a chat with my little brother Takeru Mizuno, who I usually barely talk to. I wanted to ask him a couple things. The class you two are in seems to have some *special circumstances*."

"Special circumstances?"

"Yup. He wouldn't give me any details, although I didn't really know what I should be asking either, which is kind of a problem, but anyway: definitely special circumstances. You must know what."

"The *circumstances behind the special circumstances*, you mean?" I dropped my eyes and shook my head slowly. "I don't really know much, either. I'm pretty certain that something's going on, but I just transferred here and I guess no one's going to tell me about it yet."

"The girl who died at your school last week, her name was Sakuragi, right? She was your class representative for the girls?"

"…Yeah."

"I heard about what happened. And about how you apparently witnessed it. She fell on the stairs and some horrible twist of luck made her umbrella impale her in the throat?"

"…Yes, that's what happened."

"It looked like he was scared of something."

"Your brother?"

If he'd been shocked by the freak death of a classmate, that was only natural. But "scared"? What did that mean?

"What do you mean?"

"It's not like I asked him outright. But somehow it looked like he didn't think the accident last week was just an 'accident.'"

"Not an accident?"

I scrunched my forehead.

If it wasn't an accident, then was it suicide? Or maybe murder? That was impossible. Neither of those things could possibly be true.

It wasn't suicide, it wasn't murder, and it wasn't "just an accident." So what could it possibly…?

"What was he afraid of?"

"Who knows." Ms. Mizuno cocked her head uneasily. "Nothing specific."

Hey, Sakakibara, d'you believe in ghosts or curses or whatever? Is that your thing?

I suddenly recalled the questions Teshigawara had asked me. Was that the first day I'd transferred in?

So-called supernatural phenomena in general?

That had been the same conversation, a question from Kazami.

Of course I didn't believe in "ghosts or curses or whatever" or in "supernatural phenomena in general" and I didn't want to start believing in them now. Sure, the "Seven Mysteries of North Yomi" were all kinds of strange, but they were harmless ghost stories you just expected to find somewhere like a school. In the end, even that story about "Misaki from twenty-six years ago" had to be…

But then…

What if the death of Yukari Sakuragi last week really wasn't "just an accident"?

I dredged the memories back up.

That day, Sakuragi had come flying out of the classroom when she heard the news about her mother's car accident. She'd taken her umbrella out of the umbrella stand and, her legs tangling under her,

she had first tried to come toward the East Stair, which was closest to where she stood. But then—yes, she had stopped. Maybe because she'd seen us standing by the window at the top of the stairs. The next moment, she had turned on her heel and run off in the opposite direction—to the West Stair.

What if...I wondered.

What if she had gone down the East Stair, following her initial impulse?

Then maybe that accident wouldn't have happened.

She'd bolted down the long hallway and run down the West Stair with all that momentum. And to top it off, the floor might have been wet right there and she'd slipped…That unbelievable accident had resulted from so many factors piling one on top of another. So…

Why had Sakuragi behaved that way? Why, as soon as she saw us—Mei and me—had she done what she did?

"Have you ever heard the name Mei Misaki?"

Even when the hot dog I'd ordered came, I didn't feel like picking it up. But I wet my parched mouth and throat with the iced tea I'd also ordered before posing the question to Ms. Mizuno.

"Misaki?"

Naturally, she reacted to the name. She must have recalled the name of the girl who'd died at the hospital in April, whose first name was Misaki.

"Mei…Misaki? Who's that?"

“She’s a girl in my class—third-year Class 3 at North Yomi. Your brother’s never said anything about her?”

Ms. Mizuno puffed out one of her cheeks slightly. “Remember, we hardly ever talk to each other most days. What about her, though? Did something happen?”

“You know that thing I promised I would tell you about sometime? The truth is, this girl Mei Misaki has something to do with it.”

Ms. Mizuno blinked her goggle-eyes and nodded, murmuring thoughtfully. I explained the situation to her, trying to be as simple and systematic as possible.

“Hm-m-m.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and nodded just as she had before, then took another bite of her egg sandwich.

“You told me about her before, this girl with the eye patch. I don’t remember when. Heh. So you have a crush on little Mei, huh?”

“Wha—”

Hey…h-hold on a second, lady.

“That’s not it,” I replied, a little bit indignant. “It’s just…there’s something really strange about how she acts in the classroom. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“We call that having a crush.”

“I *said* I *don’t*.”

“Fine, fine. I get it. So let me try getting a handle on this another way.”

I waited.

“That day at the end of April—I think it was the twenty-seventh?—the girl who died at the hospital was Mei’s cousin Misaki Fujioka. Mei was very sad, and she was going to the memorial chapel to see Misaki and ‘deliver’ something to her. Right?”

“Yes.”

“And? What’s so strange about the way Mei acts in class?”

“I mean…”

I had to really think hard about how to answer.

“Um…I think she’s just strange to start out with. But…you know what I mean? At first I thought maybe the class was kind of picking on her. Or maybe they were all scared of her.”

“Scared of her?”

“It’s not quite that either, though.”

Several things that I’d seen and heard since that day when I’d first come to North Yomi floated lazily through my mind.

“I have this friend named Teshigawara, and he called me up out of nowhere and told me to ‘quit paying attention to **things that aren’t there**.’”

“What does that mean?”

“According to her, it means that she’s invisible, which…”

Ms. Mizuno folded her arms over her chest again and murmured. "Hm-m-m."

I pressed on. "And then, with all that going on, that accident happened last week."

"Hm-m-m. Well, the obvious interpretation is that it's purely a coincidence. There's nothing to link the two together, is there?"

"When you take the obvious interpretation, no."

But…

"There's another issue that's been bothering me. It's something that happened twenty-six years ago…"

And then I told her "the legend of Misaki." Ms. Mizuno didn't make a sound the whole time I talked; she just listened in silence.

"…Did you know that story?"

"That's the first time I've heard it. I went to South Middle, after all."

"But your little brother knows about it."

"Oh, you think so?"

"I still don't have any idea how the two things are related. But there does seem to be a connection, and I…"

"I see-e-e."

Ms. Mizuno drained the coffee that remained in her cup.

"I haven't been back to school since it happened, so I don't know what's going on in the class right now. You haven't…heard anything

about it from your brother, right?"

"This has really started to sound like a horror story. You aren't going to eat your hot dog?"

"Oh, yeah. Thanks."

It wasn't for lack of hunger, that's for sure. As she watched me bite into my hot dog, Ms. Mizuno said, "Why don't I see if I can find anything out? About what happened twenty-six years ago, and about Mei. Unfortunately I'm not very friendly with my brother, so I don't know how much he'll tell me. You're going to school tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah."

My first time going to school in a week.

The thought made my anxiety ramp up instantly. And also…

What was Mei doing right now?

My chest ached dully, in a way that was different from the symptoms of a lung collapsing, or nearly collapsing.

"If I find anything out, I'll call you. Are you coming back to the hospital soon?"

"This Saturday."

"Saturday…June sixth? Hey, did you ever see *The Omen*?"

"When I was in elementary school, I saw it on TV."

"I don't think Damien is in our town, but…" Ms. Mizuno's face took on the "novice nurse who loves horror" look and a teasing

smile spread over her face. “But anyway, we’ll both be careful. Especially for any accidents that would never usually happen.”

4

When we left the restaurant, the rain had stopped and tiny bits of sunlight were peeking through the clouds in places.

I accepted Ms. Mizuno’s offer to drive me home and got into the passenger seat of her car, but on the way there I realized we were in a familiar part of town, and I asked her to let me out. We were in the town of Misaki, near the doll gallery “Blue Eyes Empty to All, in the Twilight of Yomi.”

“You live in Furuchi, don’t you, Sakakibara? It’s still pretty far.”

She glanced over at me dubiously, so I told her, “I’ve been cooped up for so long, I want to walk a little,” and I got out of the car.

I found “Twilight of Yomi” almost immediately.

Outside the entrance, a middle-aged woman wearing bright, marigold-colored clothes stood on the landing of the outdoor stairway that ran up the side of the building. Our eyes just happened to meet—or so it seemed. *Is she from the doll workshop upstairs?* I wondered, giving her a casual nod, but she simply climbed the stairs in silence, without the slightest reaction.

I folded my collapsible umbrella up neatly and put it away in my bag, then pushed the door open.

The bell over the door rang dully, just like last time.

“Hello there.”

The same white-haired old woman was at the same table next to the entrance, and she greeted me in the same tone of voice as last time. It was the middle of the day, but still the inside of the shop—no, I should say the inside of “the gallery”—had the same dusky lighting as the last time I’d been here.

“What’s this? We don’t get many young men in here.”

Even that was the same…

“Are you in middle school? No school today? Then you can go in for half price.”

“…Thank you.”

As I pulled my coin purse out of a pocket, the old woman added one more thing: “You take your time and have a look around. There aren’t any other customers right now, anyway.”

Feeling faintly lightheaded, I moved into the gallery.

String instruments playing a gloomy melody. Armies of dolls everywhere, both beautiful and eerie. Fantastical landscapes decorating the walls. Every last detail was the same as before. Feeling as if I were trapped in a peculiar recurring nightmare, I set my bag down on the sofa in the back. Then…

Taking deep breaths for those who had no breath, I headed toward the stairs that led down to the basement, as if pulled there at last by puppet strings.

The chill air of the basement room, so like a crypt, and the dolls (or, their various parts) lying all over the place were just as I remembered them. And in the niche-like depressions in the wall, the girl without the right arm, the boy with thin wings and the lower half of his face covered, the twins joined at the abdomen…And, yes, the black coffin that stood all the way at the back, and the doll shut up inside it that looked exactly like Mei Misaki.

Unlike last time, I didn't feel my head clouding or my body getting much colder. But, again as if led by puppet strings, I walked over to stand before the coffin at the very back of the room.

This doll had been made by **Kirika**—written to mean "fruit in the mists." That's what Mei had told me. I held my breath for a few moments, staring at the doll's face, even more waxen than the real Mei; at the mouth that seemed ready to speak at any moment—when…

Something happened then that was impossible to accept as reality right away.

From the shadows of the black coffin holding the doll, slowly, silently…

…How could that be?

All at once, I felt another faint wave of lightheadedness.

You take your time and have a look around.

The words the old woman had spoken just moments ago rang in my ears.

There aren't any other customers right now, anyway.

…Oh, of course.

The old woman had said that the last time I'd come, too. *There aren't any other customers*—I was sure of it. Her words had tugged faintly at my mind that day, too. *There aren't any other customers*—***and yet.***

Why?

Slowly, silently, from the shadow of the black coffin…

Why?

…She appeared—Mei Misaki.

She looked a little cold in this underground room, dressed in only a navy blue skirt and a white summer blouse. Her skin looked even paler than usual.

"What a coincidence. Meeting in a place like this again," Mei said, smiling faintly.

A coincidence…Is that what it was? I was struggling for a response when Mei asked me, "Why did you come here today?"

"I'm on my way home from the hospital. I happened to be walking by," I replied, then asked her a question in return. "What about you? You didn't go to school?"

"Well, you know. I ended up not going today," she said, smiling faintly again. "Are you feeling better, Sakakibara?"

"Just enough to avoid getting hospitalized again, I guess. How has everyone in class been since that—since Sakuragi's accident?"

Mei made a low noise, “Mm,” then replied, “Everyone’s… scared.”

Scared. Ms. Mizuno had said that, too.

It looked like he was scared of something.

“Scared? Of what?”

“They think **it’s started**.”

“What’s started?”

Mei **abruptly** turned her gaze aside. She looked unsure of how to answer.

“I—”

After a silence of several seconds, she spoke.

“I guess I’ve only ever half believed it, in the back of my mind. First *that* happened, then in May you came to our school and I told you all that stuff, but I still didn’t believe it a hundred percent. I guess I still doubted some part of it. But…”

She cut herself off and turned her gaze back to me. Her right eye narrowed, questioning, and I cocked my head to one side, uncomprehending.

“But it really does seem like **it’s one of those years**,” Mei continued. “A hundred percent certain, probably.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Because **it’s started**. So…”

Mei's eye narrowed again, as if challenging me, *What do you think about that?* But all I could do was cock my head at her.

"So you still don't know, huh, Sakakibara?" Mei murmured, turning her back on me quietly. "Then maybe you're not actually supposed to know. If you found out, then maybe…"

"Hold on," I spoke up reflexively. "You tell me stuff like that and then expect me to…"

I wanted to just shrug my shoulders at her and say "no idea." *"It's starting," "I doubted," "it's one of those years"* …I wish she'd cut it out with the all-knowing act already.

"Do you think you'll be able to go to school?" Mei asked, her back still turned to me.

"Yeah. I go back tomorrow."

"Ah. If you're going, then I should probably stay away."

"What? Now come on. What are you—"

"Be careful."

She turned slightly as she spoke.

"And you shouldn't tell people that you saw me here."

Then she turned her back on me again and walked off, her feet making no sound, to disappear behind the black coffin.

After a few moments, I tried calling to her softly. "C'mon, Misaki."

I took a step forward—"Look, why are you…"—but my legs

tangled slightly. A moment too late, I started to feel an odd, wobbly dizziness.

Don't you feel it being ***sucked out of you?***

Everything you have inside you?

The words Mei had spoken the last time I'd seen her here flowed through my spinning head like a spell.

Dolls are emptiness. Their bodies and hearts are total emptiness…a void.

That emptiness is like death.

Somehow I managed to take a step forward and keep my balance.

Like death…

With trepidation, I peered behind the coffin. But there…

I found Mei was gone.

There was no one else there, either.

The dark red curtains hanging in front of the wall were fluttering slightly in the breeze of the air-conditioning. A shudder ran through me as I was touched by a sudden midwinter chill.

5

"Why? Why?"

Ray the mynah bird repeated the question with her (…I think)

usual enthusiasm.

Why? Look you, *I'm* the one who wants to know why. I was glaring into the cage, but she never wavered.

"Why? Ray. Why? Morning. Morning."

After dinner, I went out to the porch on the first floor, where the signal was good, and tried calling my dad in India. Apparently his phone was turned off, though, because I called him three times and three times it didn't go through. Maybe he was still at work. Night hadn't fallen yet over there.

Well, whatever. I gave the idea up quickly.

Even if I told him about the accident last week or the bad turn I'd taken physically, he couldn't exactly give me advice on anything beyond that. The only thing I wanted from my dad, if anything, was to hear about my deceased mother's time in middle school. But of course I was still a long way from having a concrete idea of how her stories would tie into the events that were happening right now, or if they even would at all.

Part of me also wanted to ask if there were any pictures of my mother from back then. Or maybe a yearbook, but the school would be more likely to still have one of those. In fact, yeah—if I went to the secondary library in Building Zero…

I left the porch, abandoning Ray, and peered into the living room, where Reiko was watching TV for once. There was a stand-up comedy variety show on, which didn't seem like the sort of thing she would enjoy watching, but looking closer I saw that Reiko was sunk

into the sofa, both her eyes shut tight…*So she's asleep.*

A cold breeze was blowing from the air conditioner, making the room incredibly cold. Come on, Reiko! You're going to catch a cold napping in a place like that. I was just about to leave the room to go shut the air conditioner off, at least, when—

"Koichi?"

She called out to me. I jumped and turned around. Reiko's eyes were lazily open.

"When did I doze off…? Argh, this is no good. No good!"

She shook her head heavily. Just then someone on TV laughed shrilly. Reiko's eyebrows dove into a scowl and she picked up the remote and turned the TV off.

"Are you all right?"

"Huh? Sure, I guess."

Reiko moved from the couch to a chair in the dining room. She poured water into a glass from a pitcher that was on the table, then swallowed some sort of pills.

"I've got kind of a headache," she said as I watched her. "It only takes this weak stuff to make it go away. But I've been getting so many headaches lately. It's getting annoying."

"You're just tired, aren't you? You've got all sorts of stuff to deal with, and um…"

She sighed softly, then replied, "I guess. More importantly, are you all right, Koichi? You went to the hospital today, right?"

“My condition has stabilized and there are no further issues, they said.”

“Oh. That’s good.”

“Um, Reiko?”

I sat down in a chair in the dining room, too, directly across from her.

“Do you remember how you said there’s a time for finding out about things? How there’s a time for everything? But—how can you tell when it’s time?”

I asked the question in all seriousness. But Reiko looked back at me with a morose expression.

“Did I say that?”

She cocked her head to one side. I was bewildered. Ray’s shrill voice asking “Why?” rang through my mind.

Was she playing dumb, or did she really not remember? Which was it?

“Um…okay, then can I ask you something I just thought of?” I collected myself and went with a different question. “When you were in your third year at North Yomi, what class were you in?”

“When I was a third-year?”

“Yeah. Do you remember?”

When I said that, Reiko rested her cheek in one hand, her face morose again, and replied, “I was in Class 3.”

“Class 3?…Really?”

“Mm-hm.”

“So then in your year…I mean, did they say ‘the curse of Class 3’ about your class or anything like that back then?”

“Mm-m-m.”

Her head still resting on her palm, Reiko seemed to be searching for an answer. But in the end she gave a soft sigh like she had before and said, “That was fifteen years ago. I forget.”

Ignoring whether or not her excuse was genuine…

Fifteen years ago?

All of a sudden, I felt uncomfortable, but I wasn’t sure why.

Fifteen years ago would have been…Oh. I see. Of course. But that was…

“You’re going back to school tomorrow, right?” Reiko asked.

“Yeah. That’s the plan.”

“I taught you the ‘North Yomi fundamentals,’ right? Do you remember what to do?”

“Uh, yes. I already…”

“Even number three?”

“…Yeah.”

Of course I remembered. I remembered number one and number two, which seemed like superstitions, and number four, which had

the greatest meaning for me. And number three…I believe that one was…

"Obey whatever the class decides, at any cost—was that it?"

"That's right."

Reiko nodded slowly.

"What about it?"

Reiko suddenly gave a drawn-out yawn, then shook her head back and forth rapidly. Then, shaking it off, she said, "Oh, uh…What was it…?" and craned her head all the way to one side.

"We were talking about number three of the 'North Yomi fundamentals.'"

"Oh, were we? Let's see. You should adhere to all of them, really. I mean…"

"Uh. Are you all right?"

"Mm-m-m. I guess I really am pretty tired. Sorry, Koichi. I just can't do it."

Lightly thumping herself on the head with a fist, a feeble smile came over Reiko's face. I started to feel irritated, pained, but my emotions were more complex than just that.

I could tell Reiko about Mei, couldn't I? In fact, didn't I *have* to force the subject? I'd often thought so, but I couldn't manage to bring it up. The end result of my internal conflict this time, once again, was that I decided not to pursue it.

I wasn't very good at talking to Reiko like this. She made me so nervous…The biggest reason for that was because I would suddenly see in her the shadow of my mother, whom I knew only from photographs. So, see? I had already gone through the self-analysis. So why did I feel like that tendency was only getting worse? It had to be a problem with me after all. Or maybe…

I decided to go back to my room for the night and try to get to sleep as early as I could.

With that decision made, I stood up from my chair.

"Why?" a small voice whispered, though without any deeper meaning or intention.

"Cut that out!" Reiko said, her tone surprisingly harsh. "I can't stand that bird."

6

The next day was June 3, Wednesday.

Mei Misaki wasn't in the classroom at lunchtime.

And she hadn't left the instant fourth period ended, either. She hadn't been there all day. She was staying away today, just as she'd told me yesterday.

I hadn't been in school for a week, and the way my classmates acted toward me was, to put a positive spin on it, sensible—but in a more penetrating analysis, they were acting cool and perfunctory.

"Were you in the hospital again?"

No, I was resting at home.

"Same thing you had before? What'd you call it, a spontaneous pneumothorax?"

I got really close to having one, but it turned out all right.

"So you're okay now?"

Yeah, thanks. But no strenuous activity—doctor's orders. So that means I'm still sitting out of gym class.

"Well, I hope you feel better."

Me, too, thanks.

Not a single person mentioned the deaths of Yukari Sakuragi and her mother. The teachers were the same. The desk where Sakuragi had sat in the classroom was left empty. There weren't even any flowers set on it, like people sometimes do…Everyone was trying to avoid acknowledging her death. More than necessary, it seemed. I couldn't help interpreting their behavior that way.

When lunch started, Tomohiko Kazami was the first one to speak to me. I had called out to him as he was leaving the room.

"Oh…hey."

As he pushed the bridge of his silver-rimmed glasses as far up his nose as they would go, Kazami's stiff expression morphed into an awkward smile.

You know, I'm pretty sure this is how he acted when I first met

him in April, too, when he came to see me at the hospital. Having known him for a month now, I'd thought he had opened up a little bit, but it felt as if we'd been reset back to zero.

The first time we'd ever seen each other and now—the main thing underlying them both, I would say, was "tension." The second-biggest thing was what seemed like a kind of "wariness." The realization hit me all at once.

"I'm glad you're better. I was worried about you. You were out for a whole week, so I thought maybe you'd relapsed."

"I was worried, too. To be honest, I'm sick of being in the hospital."

"You don't really need any of the notes from classes while you out, right?" Kazami said it sheepishly. "You're pretty good, huh?"

"I learned some of it already at my other school, that's all…I'm not really *that* good."

"Oh, so then do you want copies of the notes?"

"I think I'm still okay for right now."

"Ah. Okay…"

Even as we carried on this meaningless conversation, the stiffness never left Kazami's face. Tension and wariness and maybe, on top of that, "fear"…?

"The accident last week must have been really traumatic for you."

I decided I would be the one to bring it up.

“You were both class representatives, and you both came to see me at the hospital, and then for something like that…”

As I talked, I looked over at Sakuragi’s desk. Kazami looked a little flustered.

“We’re going to have to pick a new class representative for the girls. We’re probably going to do that at the extended homeroom tomorrow…”

Then he hurriedly broke away from me and left the classroom.

“A new representative, huh?”

Kazami and Sakuragi had practically been twins, but I suppose there were tons of people who could fill in as class representative at a middle school…

Still sitting at my desk, I took a cautious look around the room. It was June now, and most of the students were wearing their summer uniforms.

There were girls who had constructed “islands” to eat at, here one, there a second. A group of boys had gathered in a corner by the windows to chat. There was one who was strikingly taller than the rest of them. He was pretty tanned and his hair was cut in a sporty buzz. That had to be Mizuno. Takeru Mizuno, from the basketball club. So his first name was written with the character for “ferocity.”

I momentarily considered going over to talk to him.

I could use his sister to break the ice, and depending on how things went, I could talk about how I’d met up with her yesterday, and…No. That was a bad idea. For now, what I needed to do was

wait for news from Ms. Mizuno. She'd told me, "Why don't I see if I can find anything out?" She'd said she and her brother weren't very close, so if I made a fumbling attempt to reach out to him now, it would just set off alarm bells in his mind and she might not be able to get anything out of him.

I stuffed myself with my grandmother's homemade lunch, filled with incredible gratitude as always, then I went out into the hallway by myself. The whole time, I'd felt as if Mizuno/Little Brother by the windows was constantly glancing over at me, and I don't think it was just my mind playing tricks on me.

Just as I'd done last Tuesday, I stood at the windows at the top of the East Stair.

There were a few clouds in the sky. It wasn't raining, but the wind was blowing too hard. Even though the window was closed, I could hear its high, intermittent howling.

Turning my back on the window and leaning against the wall, I pulled my cell phone from the pocket of my pants. I looked up Teshigawara's number in my call history, then pushed the call button without a moment's hesitation.

Teshigawara was at school that day. But he hadn't spoken to me once and he looked as though he would prefer to avoid even eye contact with me. By the time I'd looked around after lunch started, he had already disappeared from the classroom. Seriously, who does he think he is, Mei Misaki?

"H-hey."

After however many attempts, he finally answered the phone. I instantly asked, “Where are you?”

“Er…”

“No, you’re not in ‘er.’ Tell me where you are.”

“Outside…walking around the courtyard.”

“The yard?”

I turned to look out the window and scanned the ground through the glass. There were more students milling around out there than I would have expected, so I couldn’t tell where Teshigawara was.

“I’m coming down right now. Wait for me by the lotus pond?”

“Wha—uh, come on, Sakaki…”

“I’ll be right there.”

I cut the call before he could say anything and hurried to the place I’d told him to be.

7

Just as I’d instructed, Teshigawara was waiting for me at the pond where a bloody human hand was rumored to rise out of the water occasionally. The pond’s surface was covered by the round leaves of water lilies, not lotuses. There were no students I recognized nearby. Apparently he’d been “walking around the courtyard” alone.

“I tried calling you a bunch of times last week, but you never

answered."

I said it in the coldest voice I could manage. Teshigawara made an exaggerated gesture, bringing his hands together in front of him, and said, "Yeah, sorry 'bout that," but the whole time he was trying to keep his gaze from landing on my face.

"Whenever you called, I was always in the middle of something. I kept thinking about it, but it's not like I could call you. I mean, you weren't feeling good, right? So I didn't want to bother you."

It sounded like a flimsy excuse to me.

"You promised me," I said. "You said you'd tell me in June."

"Er…"

"I told you, 'er' is not an answer!"

The bleached moppet didn't try to hide how shaken he was. I fixed him with an uncharacteristically harsh stare. "I want you to keep your promise. You're the one who offered, after all. Something happened twenty-six years ago. There was a popular kid named Misaki in the third-year Class 3 that year, and they were killed in a freak accident…Then what happened?"

He didn't say a word.

"You guys said something about that being *the year it started*… So? What happened to third-year Class 3 after that?"

"Hey, hey, hold on, Sakaki."

For the first time, Teshigawara looked me straight in the face.

“Yeah, you’re right, I did promise you. I said I’d tell you once we got to June. And what I meant was that I wanted you to sit tight the whole rest of the month.”

Teshigawara gave a dejected-sounding sigh. A powerful wind moaned in the sky overhead.

“The situation has changed.”

He turned his eyes away again as he said that.

“Things are different now than they were when I said that. So…”

“So you’re saying you want out of the promise?”

“…Yeah.”

How could he…? Obviously I had a lot of trouble accepting that. But judging from the way I could see Teshigawara acting, I got the feeling that it would be pointless to try and question him any more right now. Still.

There was one question I couldn’t let slide. Which was…

“Remember that day you warned me to ‘quit paying attention to **things that aren’t there**’?”

Teshigawara nodded silently, his expression pulled tight.

“You told me ‘it’s dangerous.’ So what did you—”

Just then, a crude buzzing came through the pocket of my pants. Who could that be? I ran through the names as I pulled out my cell phone, its incoming call light flashing. The name on the screen was Ms. Mizuno. I’d just seen her yesterday.

“Oh, Sakakibara? You’re at lunch, right? Is it okay to talk right now?” Ms. Mizuno’s voice sounded a little skittish just then. “I’m at the hospital right now.”

“Huh? I thought you had today off?”

I was conscious of Teshigawara listening in, so I covered my mouth with my left hand and lowered my voice.

“Someone called out today, so they told me to come in. This job is seriously tough. Especially when you’re a newbie.”

After moaning about the cruelty of it all, Ms. Mizuno changed her tone and went on.

“So. I stole a couple seconds from the insanity and came up to the roof of the inpatient ward. That’s where I am now.”

“What’s going on? Did you…?”

“I tried talking to him last night.”

“Your brother? About that thing?”

“Right. When I talked to him…Well, there’s one thing I want to confirm with you before I say anything else.”

“What’s that?”

“Ready?”

Ms. Mizuno made her voice a little louder. She was definitely on the roof—or at least outside—since I could clearly hear the shrill sound of the wind.

“That girl Mei you told me about yesterday. Mei Misaki,” Ms.

Mizuno said. **“Is she actually there?”**

“Excuse me?”

I didn’t know what to say to that…

“Yes, she’s really there.”

“Right now? Is she nearby? Are you sure?”

“No, she didn’t come to school today.”

“So **she’s not there**.”

“What are you talking about?” I felt my voice getting louder. “Why would you ask…?”

“I told you, I talked to my brother last night.”

Ms. Mizuno quickly gave me what information she had.

“I tried asking him about that thing twenty-six years ago and about the accident last week, but he just stalled me on all of it. He still looked like he was scared of something, too, like he was at the end of his rope. But then last of all, I tried asking about Mei.”

Kksshh…I heard some interference on the line and her voice crackled.

“When I did that, his face went all red and he demanded, ‘Why are you asking me that? There’s no one like that in my class.’ He looked totally serious, like I’ve never seen him before. So I thought maybe this girl named Mei Misaki really didn’t…”

“He’s lying.”

I saw Teshigawara's face, looking over at me suspiciously. I turned my back on him, then recruited my right hand, which gripped the phone, to completely cover my mouth. Then—

"He's lying," I repeated fiercely.

"But…he was so serious. I don't see why he would have to lie…"

Kshhkkkshhsshk…I heard the interference again and Ms. Mizuno's voice broke off. I didn't care. I told her, "Mei Misaki exists."

Mei *exists*. I'd seen her dozens of times. Talked to her dozens of times. I'd seen her yesterday, even. Talked to her yesterday. How could she possibly *not exist*? It was crazy.

"…Wha—?"

Her voice cut through the interference, sounding somehow different than it had before.

"Uh…what's happening?"

"What is it?"

Kksshsshkksh…rmbbmmblrrrmmb…kkssh!

"Ms. Mizuno? Can you hear me?"

"…Sakakibara?"

Her voice crackled much louder than before.

"I got off the roof. I'm on the elevator. I need to get back soo—"

"Oh, so that's why the signal's so bad."

"…But this is…No! What's—!"

Rrmmrrmbbl...The interference grew thicker and more intense. Ms. Mizuno's voice seemed to be swallowed up in it, and then it broke off.

"Ms. Mizuno!"

I squeezed my hand tighter around the phone reflexively.

"Can you hear me? What's going—"

My words came to a stop; a strange sound was coming through the phone. It's hard to describe what it sounded like. A really strange, horrible noise…

I took the phone from my ear, unable to listen anymore.

What had happened?

She'd gotten on the elevator, and her signal had deteriorated… Was that why? Was that what the sound was? No, before that she'd…

Terrified, I put the phone back to my ear. Instantly I heard some kind of hard, violent sound. It sounded—yes, it was exactly as if the phone had been dropped on the floor.

Kkssshhkshhskkkshh, rrmrrmmmblrrmb...The interference finally grew more intense. In the last moment before the connection between the two phones was lost…

I heard, faintly but clearly, the sound of Ms. Mizuno groaning in pain.

Chapter 7

June II

1

Ms. Mizuno was dead.

I learned the frankly debilitating truth that evening. The only information I was able to get so far was that there had been an accident at the hospital, but I think I had been prepared for the worst, even before that.

That phone call during lunch…

There was no doubting the fact that some kind of abnormal calamity had befallen her. But no matter how many times I tried to call her back, I never got through. As a result, I had no way of finding out what happened, so I was forced to spend hours tortured by anxiety and restlessness.

"Ms. Mizuno? That young nurse?"

When she heard about it, my grandmother seemed truly shocked, too. She had met Ms. Mizuno several times while I'd been hospitalized in April.

"Mizuno…Sanae, wasn't it? You two got along so well. She would talk to you about your books…"

"I saw her once at the hospital, too, I think. The day I came to visit you, she was…"

Reiko looked extremely depressed. After dinner, she'd taken the same medicine as the night before. I guess she had a headache again.

“She was still so young. I hope her little brothers will be okay.”

“She had brothers?” my grandmother asked.

I replied, “One is named Takeru. He’s in my class, actually.”

“Oh, my.” My grandmother’s eyes went round. “How awful. Didn’t a girl from your class just pass away in an accident?”

I knitted my brows pensively, my temples throbbing.

“They said there was an accident at the hospital…I wonder what it could have been.”

Nobody could answer.

But the horrible sound I’d heard over the phone at lunchtime boomed again in my ear. And Ms. Mizuno’s pained moaning, fading in and out of the intense interference.

Unable to bear it, I shut my eyes tightly.

I thought about telling them, right then, what had happened at lunch. As I thought it over, there was no reason for me to hesitate so much over it…and yet.

I didn’t tell them. No—I couldn’t tell them. I think because I felt something akin to guilt deep down and I couldn’t shake free of it.

My grandfather had been quiet, but now he let out an “Ah-h, ah-h” in his papery voice. He pressed both hands to his wrinkled, colorless forehead.

“When someone dies, there’s a funeral. I don’t…I don’t want to go to any more funerals.”

For whatever reason, maybe because there was an inauspicious day coming up, the wake was the day after tomorrow and the memorial service would be the day after that, on Saturday. Saturday? Oh, right…June 6.

Did you ever see The Omen*?*

I vividly recalled the conversation Ms. Mizuno and I had had at the restaurant. It was only yesterday.

We'll both be careful. Especially for any accidents that would never usually happen.

She was dead.

The day after tomorrow was her wake, and the day after that was her memorial service. It seemed so unreal. Shock was the only thing I felt at first. Emotions like sadness couldn't get a grip on me yet.

"…I don't want to go to any more funerals."

As I listened to my grandfather sluggishly repeat himself, the word "funeral" created a dark stain somewhere in my heart. Before I could even react, a black whirlpool had begun to turn slowly around it, until finally—how can I put it?—a strange, low frequency sound rose up from everywhere at once, ***Vmmmmm***…

I closed my eyes tightly again. At the same moment, something in my mind came to a halt.

The next day, June 4, an oppressive climate filled the classroom in third-year Class 3 within moments of starting the day.

Ms. Mizuno's little brother Takeru hadn't come in. By the time second period was over, the rumor that he was absent because of his older sister's sudden death had spread through the class. And in third period, before starting the language arts class, the head teacher, Mr. Kubodera, openly told everyone **it was true**.

"Mizuno's older sister met with a sudden and unfortunate incident yesterday…"

Instantly, an odd silence smothered the room. As if the breath of every student had crystallized in the air in an instant…

Worst of all, Mei Misaki entered the room just then.

Without so much as apologizing for her tardiness, without showing any self-consciousness whatsoever, she sat down in her usual seat, silent. I watched her as she went, uneasiness thrumming in my chest. Then I turned my attention to the reactions of everyone else in the class, too.

Not a single one of them turned to look at Mei. They all had their eyes fixed, almost unnaturally, straight ahead. Mr. Kubodera was exactly the same. He didn't look at Mei or speak to her. It was as if…

Yes, it was as if there simply was no student named Mei Misaki in this class. As if she didn't exist.

When the language arts class ended, I quickly got out of my seat and hurried over to Mei.

“Come with me,” I said, pulling her into the hall. Ignoring whoever might be listening, I asked, “Did you hear about what happened to Mizuno?”

She cocked her head slightly and asked “What?” so apparently she didn’t know about it yet. The eye not hidden by the eye patch blinked wonderingly.

“She died. His older sister died yesterday.”

I thought I saw surprise color her face for an instant. But it disappeared almost immediately.

“…Oh.” Her voice revealed no emotion. “Was she sick? Or was it an accident or something?”

“They say it was an accident.”

“Ah.”

Several students had clumped up near the door to the classroom. There were a couple of boys and girls whose names and faces I knew, but whom I still hadn’t really talked to. Nakao, Maejima, Akazawa, Ogura, Sugiura…Teshigawara was among them, too. He hadn’t spoken a word to me since lunch yesterday.

I knew they were all shooting looks over at us. As if watching how things developed from a distance.

Could it be? I had to give the idea pretty serious consideration now.

Could it really be that what they saw now was only me?

And—

When the next class started, Mei had vanished from the classroom. Naturally, no one but me paid it any attention.

As soon as lunch started, I went over to Mei's desk, farthest back in the row by the windows that faced the schoolyard, and gave her desk a fresh inspection.

It was a wooden desk, of a clearly different shape than the rest of the desks in the room. The chair that went with it was the same. Like something that had been used dozens of years ago. An incredibly old desk and chair.

Why was that? I asked myself, feeling behind the curve. *Why is Mei's desk the only one like this?*

By now I'd decided to ignore the watchful eyes of those around me, so I sat down in her seat. The surface of the desk was notched all over and uneven. I doubted it was possible to fill out a test, say, and write clearly at all without a backing sheet.

There was a lot of graffiti among all the cuts in the desk.

Most of the graffiti was old—extremely old—like the desk. Some was written in pencil. Some in pen. Some carved in, probably with the tip of a compass. Some had almost vanished; some was only barely legible. And there in the middle…

My eyes fixed on a row of letters that looked freshly written. They were recent.

They were written small, on the right edge of the desk, in blue pen. There was no real way to judge the penmanship or anything, but as soon as I saw it, I knew that Mei had written it.

Who is “the casualty”?

That was what she had written.

3

“…I wonder how Ms. Mikami’s doing.”

From his seat beside me at the worktable, Yuya Mochizuki voiced his concern rhetorically.

“I wonder if she’s really feeling that bad. She looked pretty out of it the other day…”

Fifth period was art class with Ms. Mikami, but there was no sign of her in the art room on the first floor of Building Zero yet.

A different art teacher came in at the start of the period and told us, “Ms. Mikami is out today,” before instructing us in a businesslike tone that we would be having an art class study hall. We were told, “Each of you draw your own hand in pencil,” a completely uninteresting subject, and as soon as the teacher left the room, there were apathetic sighs here and there in the room. It was a natural reaction, really.

I opened my sketchbook, and then—why not, after all?—rested my left hand on the table and stared at its every detail. But honestly, my motivation was as close to zero as you could get. If I’d known, I

would have brought a book. Though I didn't feel much like reading King or Koontz or Lovecraft.

When I looked over at Mochizuki, the Munch aficionado, I saw that he'd never had any intention of drawing a hand. But it was not a blank page in his sketchbook; he was working on a half-finished drawing in pen. A person—I could see at a glance that it was a woman modeled on Ms. Mikami.

What's with this guy? I almost wound up saying it out loud.

Did he seriously have a crush on her? This kid? On his teacher, who was at least ten years older than him? I guess that was up to him.

Still, I was already in an ambiguous mood when I heard his mumbled wondering about Ms. Mikami, so…

"…No way."

Suddenly Mochizuki looked over at me.

"Hey, Sakakibara…"

"Wh-what?"

"Ms. Mikami doesn't have some kind of life-threatening disease, does she?"

"What? Uh…" I was completely flabbergasted. All I could offer was a tepid response. "I'm sure she's fine."

"You're probably right." Mochizuki's voice was incredibly relieved. "No, you're right. It wouldn't be anything weird like that. Yeah."

“Are you *that* worried?”

“I mean…Sakuragi and her mom both died recently, and now there’s Mizuno’s sister. So I figured…”

“Are you saying they’re related?”

I cut straight to the point.

“There was the thing with Sakuragi and the thing in Mizuno’s family, but let’s just say as a for-instance that something happened to Ms. Mikami. Are you telling me there’s some kind of relationship? That there’s a connection there?”

“Uh, well…”

Mochizuki started to answer, then shut his mouth. He turned his eyes away, as if to escape my question, and gave a helpless sigh. Argh, even this kid’s got **something** he can’t tell me shut up inside him.

I thought about putting the screws to him a little more; but, thinking better of it, I changed the subject. “How’s the art club? How many members do you have now?”

“Just five…” Mochizuki’s eyes darted back to me. “You joining?”

“…No way.”

“You really should.”

“If you’re recruiting, forget about me. Why not Misaki?”

I said it to put some pressure on him. Mochizuki reacted exactly

as I'd expected, spluttering. He went dead quiet and didn't answer, turning his eyes away from me again. This time he didn't even breathe.

"She's pretty good at drawing," I went on, unconcerned. "I saw some of the stuff she's got in her sketchbook."

Yes—that had been in the secondary library. That day when I had passed by with Mochizuki and Teshigawara after art class…

The drawings of beautiful girls with globes at their joints, like dolls.

I'm going to give this girl huge wings, last of all. Mei had told me that then. Had she drawn the wings yet?

I gave up on Mochizuki, whose eyes were still turned away and who had not yet attempted to offer so much as a word in response. I shut my own sketchbook. Not even thirty minutes had gone by since the start of fifth period, but I had decided to abandon this independent study.

"Where are you going?" Mochizuki asked when I stood up from my seat.

"The library. The secondary one," I answered, deliberately curt. "I need to look something up."

4

When I told Mochizuki I had something to look up, it was pretty

much the truth. The part that wasn't included in that "pretty much" was the faint hope that Mei might be there. But that hope was not realized.

There were no students there. The only person in the ancient library was the librarian, Chibiki.

"Here's a face I've seen before."

He spoke to me from behind the counter-style table that was set up in one corner. Today, again, he was tricked out in all black, his hair, sprinkled with white, as straw-like as ever. He fixed his eyes on me through the lenses of his homely black-rimmed glasses.

"Sakakibara, the transfer student."

He spoke my name.

"Third-year Class 3, was it? My memory's not as bad as all that. Why aren't you in class?"

"It's art, and um, the teacher is out today, so it's a study hall."

I told him what was going on, and the all-in-black librarian didn't pursue it any further.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. "It's rare that a student comes here, most days."

"Um, there's something I'm looking for." Again I told him the situation. I walked slowly up to the counter where he sat, then asked him, "Do you have old yearbooks here?"

"Oho, yearbooks, is it? We have a full set of them."

“Can people look at them?”

“They can.”

“Then, uh…”

“I believe they’re over there.”

At long last he stood up and extended an arm in front of him. He was pointing at the bookcases covering the wall shared with the hallway, to the right of the entrance.

“They’re on that shelf, second from the inside, I think. Somewhere around there. You probably won’t need a step stool, with your height.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“What year are you looking for?”

“Well…” I faltered just a little. “From twenty-six years ago…the one from 1972.”

“Seventy-two?”

The librarian’s brows knit sharply and he looked straight into my face.

“Why would you want to see that?”

“Well, actually…”

I did everything I could to regain my equilibrium and struggled to give a harmless answer.

“My mom graduated from this middle school that year. And my mom, she, uh, she died young and I don’t have many photos of her,

so I, um…"

"Your mother?"

The look in the librarian's eyes seemed to soften very slightly.

"I see. All right. But seventy-two, of all things." The last part he murmured to himself. "You should find it pretty quickly. But it's not available for lending. When you're done looking at it, put it back where you found it. Understand?"

"I will."

It took maybe two or three minutes before I located the yearbook I wanted and pulled it down from the shelf. I set it down on the large reading desk and pulled up a chair. Then, as I got my somewhat ragged breathing under control, I turned back the cover embossed with "North Yomiyama Middle School" in silver foil.

First of all, I looked for the page with third-year Class 3. I soon found the two-page spread, laid out with the left page showing a group photo in color and the right page showing black-and-white photos of the students split into several groups.

There were more students than now. More than forty students in the class.

The background of the group photo was somewhere outside the school. The bank of the Yomiyama River or somewhere like that. Everyone was wearing their winter uniforms. They were smiling, but I could tell that there was some kind of tension in it.

My mom—where was she?

It didn't seem as if I was going to be able to find her so easily just by looking at the faces. I had to consult the names written under the picture…

…There she was. That one.

"Mom…"

The word slipped out of me unintentionally.

Second row, fifth from the right.

She wore a navy blue blazer exactly like the current uniform. Her hair was put up with a white barrette or something…and she was smiling, too. With some sort of tension in her face.

This was the first time I'd seen a picture of my mom from middle school. It struck me how young she was—how childish, in fact. Adjusting for age, I could see that she really did resemble her younger sister, Reiko.

"Did you find her?" the librarian asked me.

Without turning around, I simply replied, "Yes," and returned my eyes to the list of names under the group photo. I wanted to check if the name "Misaki" was there. But…

There was no reason it would be.

Misaki had died in the spring of that year, long before they started preparing the yearbook. So there was no reason the name would be there.

"What class was your mother in?"

The librarian asked me another question. His voice was much closer than the last time. I turned around, surprised, and found that he had left the counter and come over to stand right next to me.

"Um, well, I heard that when she was a third-year, she was in Class 3."

The librarian's eyebrows dove sharply again. "Hm?" Then he rested a hand on the edge of the table and peered at the yearbook. "Which one is your mother?"

"This one."

I pointed her out in the group photo. "Let's see." The librarian pushed his glasses up and brought his face closer to the book. "Ah, Ritsuko, is it?"

"Huh? You knew her?"

"Oh…well, you know."

The librarian evaded my question and moved away from the desk. He realized that I was following his movement with my eyes and ruffled his straw-like hair. "Ritsuko's son. I didn't know…"

"My mom died fifteen years ago, right after I was born."

"I see. Which means…Ah. Yes, I see."

I fought back the urge to ask what it was that he saw, and dropped my eyes back to the yearbook on the table.

Second row, fifth from the right.

I looked at my mom's face, smiling there with an air of tension,

then looked at the group of classmates pictured with her, and then…

…Huh?

I realized **something** and blinked. I had half stood from my chair, so I sat back down, then looked more closely at the yearbook. Which is when—

"So here you are, Sakakibara."

The door banged open and a student came in just as the bell ending fifth period began to ring. It was Tomohiko Kazami.

"Mr. Kubodera is looking for you. He wants you to go to the teachers' office right away."

5

"You're Koichi Sakakibara, correct?"

There were two men I'd never seen before, one of whom—the middle-aged man with the round face—spoke to me. His voice was more placating than it needed to be, intended to soothe the tension of its listener, but he questioned me without hesitation.

"You know about what happened to Ms. Mizuno, who used to work at the municipal hospital?"

"…Yes."

"Were you close with her?"

"She was nice to me when I was hospitalized in April, so…"

“You talked on the phone?”

“Yes, a few times.”

“Yesterday afternoon—around one o’clock, you spoke with her on her cell phone?”

“…I did.”

I’d been summoned by Mr. Kubodera, and waiting for me when I reached the teachers’ office in Building A had been plainclothes cops from the criminal affairs bureau of the Yomiyama police force—detectives, in other words. Two of them, just like the formula goes. In contrast to the jolly-looking middle-aged man with the round face, the younger one had a narrow face with a jutting chin and large glasses with navy blue frames, which seriously made him look like a dragonfly. Their names were Oba and Takenouchi.

“We want to ask you some questions. Your teacher told us that was fine. Do you mind?”

Takenouchi had been the one to say that, cutting to the chase a few moments ago as soon as we’d met. It wasn’t bad enough to come off as brusque, but his tone smacked of the idea that he was only talking to “a half-man middle schooler.”

“We’re having the extended homeroom next,” Mr. Kubodera had added. “But that’s fine if you need to come late so you can talk to them.”

Almost immediately, the bell rang to start sixth period, and Mr. Kubodera handed the matter off to another male teacher and hurried out of the room.

There were sofas set in one corner of the room, where I sat facing the detectives. The teacher who'd been asked to handle things introduced himself as "Yashiro, a guidance counselor," then sat down beside me. I suppose there was no way the school was going to leave a student on his own in a situation like this.

"You're aware that Sanae Mizuno passed away yesterday," Oba continued in his more-soothing-than-necessary voice.

"…Yes."

"And the manner of her death?"

"No, I didn't get any details. Just that there was an accident at the hospital."

"I see."

"You didn't read the paper this morning?" Takenouchi cut in to ask. I shook my head silently. In fact, I realized, my grandparents didn't have a newspaper delivered to their house. And no one turned the TV on at night, either…

"There was a problem with the elevator," Takenouchi informed me.

I had pretty much guessed that. There had been a few whispers along those lines sprinkled through the voices filling the classroom. But the instant I heard it said officially, from the mouth of a detective, I felt a dull shock that numbed my entire body.

"An elevator in the inpatient ward fell. She was the only one in it. She hit the floor with the full force of the fall, and then the shock of the impact also caused an iron beam to come free in the ceiling and

fall on her," the young detective explained with a slight air of triumph. "And, unfortunately for her, it smashed into her head."

There was no answer to that.

"The cause of death was a cerebral contusion. When they recovered her from the scene of the accident, she was completely unconscious. They did everything they could at the hospital, but in the end they weren't able to save her."

"U-um…" I began timidly. "Was there, um, anything suspicious about the accident?"

Maybe that's why there are detectives investigating it, I thought.

"Oh, no, it was just an accident," the middle-aged detective replied. "An extremely sad, unfortunate accident. But when an elevator falls at a hospital, certain issues arise such as determining the cause and investigating any administrative responsibility. That's what we're working on."

"…Ah."

"Ms. Mizuno's cell phone fell to the floor of the elevator in question. Its call history showed your name and number, Sakakibara. Moreover, we saw that the call was placed around one o'clock, exactly when the accident occurred. So we believe that you may be the last person she spoke with."

Ah. Once they said it aloud, it was completely obvious.

The one person in the world most likely to know what had gone on right before and after the accident yesterday. They'd realized that person was the middle schooler she'd been on the phone with,

Koichi Sakakibara. And it was true, I had indeed heard **it happen** yesterday.

But wasn't it a little late for them to come see me? That thought occurred to me, too. I could pretty much imagine the chaos at the scene after the accident yesterday, but still…

At their urging, I recounted what I had experienced.

How I had received a call from Ms. Mizuno yesterday at lunchtime. How we had talked normally at first, then how things had changed suddenly when she left the roof and went into the elevator. How I'd heard some kind of horrible sound almost immediately, then a sound like the phone had been tossed away, and then an instant later the sound of her pained moaning before the call was cut off. Each of them seemed to match up with an aspect of the accident.

"Did you tell anyone about it?"

"Right after it happened, I had no idea what was going on. I tried calling her back, but I couldn't get through."

Struggling to calm myself, I described my actions of the day before.

"But I still thought something bad might have happened, so I went to find Mizuno."

"Who?"

"Takeru Mizuno. Ms. Mizuno's little brother. He's in my class. I told him about what I heard on the phone, but I guess he couldn't figure out what I was saying, so he didn't take me very seriously…"

What are you talking about? You're not making sense.

That had been Mizuno/Little Brother's reaction. Angry, but also incredibly confused.

You need to quit feeding my sister crazy stories. You're causing a lot of problems for me.

The only thing I could think to do after that was contact the hospital.

The nurses' station in the inpatient ward had answered and I'd asked for Ms. Mizuno. But that hadn't reached her, either, like I pretty much thought, and soon things had gotten incredibly frantic on the other end of the phone…Then, no matter how many times I'd tried to call, all I'd gotten was a busy signal, and there was nothing left for me to do.

"She was on the roof, correct?" Oba confirmed. "Then she got on the elevator, and immediately…I see."

The middle-aged detective nodded, taking notes.

"What do you think caused the accident?" I asked him.

"That's still under investigation," the young detective answered. "What we do know is that the elevator fell because a wire snapped. There are safety measures in place, so typically something like this shouldn't happen. That hospital building is decades old, though, and apparently they've made a lot of unnecessary improvements in that time. The elevator in question was in the back of the building and they even called it 'the back elevator.' Patients never use it, of course, and even employees normally didn't bother with it."

“Did you know about this elevator, Sakakibara?”

“No, I never heard of it.”

“In any case, on top of the elevator being antiquated, there are some questions about whether proper maintenance had been conducted.”

“I see.”

“It really was an accident that happened here. And given that this is a public building, this raises major concerns, naturally. Still, a fatality in an elevator crash is unusual nowadays. All we can say is that she had terrible luck.”

We’ll both be careful.

The words Ms. Mizuno had spoken the last time I’d seen her echoed in my ears again.

Especially for any accidents that would never usually happen.

6

Sixth period had begun and was more than thirty minutes gone when I was released from the “voluntary questioning” by the detectives.

I left the office and dutifully hurried to my classroom, but when I arrived I got a surprise. Not a single student of third-year Class 3 was in the room.

Looking around, I saw their bags and stuff were still there. So they hadn’t finished early and gone home—which meant…

They'd all gone to some other place together? That was all I could think of…

Izumi Akazawa

Her name was written in large letters in the center of the blackboard.

Izumi Akazawa.

She had a slightly grown-up, forceful, glamorous persona. She had a feminine figure, was always surrounded by friends, at the center of a group.

…Pretty much the opposite of Mei, huh?

Despite the thought, I recalled a few things about this student named Akazawa that nagged at me.

The day I'd first come to this school in May, I was pretty sure Izumi Akazawa had been absent. And then in gym class that other day…The time Yukari Sakuragi, who was sitting out gym class with a twisted leg, came over to talk to me…

I have to do this right, or Akazawa's going to get mad at me…

I thought I could hear the words, spoken to herself, in my ears. What had that been about?

And that phone call I'd gotten from Teshigawara after that, out of the blue.

I'm calling 'cause I thought you might be in trouble.

He'd said that, then continued:

Akazawa's pretty wound up. She might start having some kind of hysterical episode.

"Oh, Sakakibara."

I turned around at the sound, and there was Mr. Kubodera. He came into the classroom through the door at the back of the room, as if tailing me.

"Have you finished talking with the police?"

"Yes."

"I see. Then you can go home now, if you'd like."

"Oh. Um…where is everyone?"

"They picked a new class representative for the girls in homeroom. Akazawa."

"Oh?"

So that's why her name was on the blackboard.

"Um, so then where is everyone?"

But Mr. Kubodera basically ignored my question.

"You can go home for the day," he repeated. "I'm sure the incident with Mizuno's sister has been quite a shock for you, too. But you can't let yourself get too downhearted. Things will be all right. If everyone pulls together, I'm sure we'll get through this."

"…Yeah."

“For that, do you agree?”

Although he was talking to me, Mr. Kubodera’s eyes were turned not on me, but on the empty lectern.

“We need to obey whatever the class decides, without fail. All right?”

7

The next day, Saturday, June 6, I stayed home from school so I could go to the municipal hospital in Yumigaoka. If things were still normal, I might have seen Ms. Mizuno again today, but…

Her memorial service was being held right now at a funeral home somewhere in this town…I was conscious of that fact as I went to my outpatient exam in the respiratory unit. The lead physician, just entering old age, certified me in an unusually compelling voice, saying “In this state, you should be fine.” Afterward, I headed to the inpatient ward alone.

I wanted to see the site of the accident that had taken Ms. Mizuno’s life with my own eyes, if only once.

Just as the detectives had told me, the location of the “back elevator” I was searching for was hard to find, pretty far back in an old part of the inpatient ward, which had a complex floor plan. I managed to make my way there somehow or other, but of course the elevator was off-limits and several strips of yellow police tape had been put up to cover the entrance.

Why had Ms. Mizuno, the novice nurse, gotten on this elevator that day, when even the employees hardly ever used it? Had she actually been in the habit of using it? Or had she just happened to get on it that day? Even now, those details weren't clear.

I took a different elevator up to the roof, alone.

It had been relatively humid all day, slightly cloudy and windless.

I was walking from one end of the empty roof to the other, feeling that someone would call out "What's wrong, Horror Boy?" to me any moment, when I came to a sudden stop. I wiped the sweat from my face with a handkerchief. There may have been some tears mixed in there.

"Why…Ms. Mizuno…" I mumbled without realizing it. I was suddenly oppressed by the visceral weight of the emptiness of "death," to the point I thought my chest might crumple in on itself.

As I slowly brought my breathing under control, I leaned against the fence and looked out across the town of Yomiyama. When Reiko had come to visit me in the hospital, she'd shown me a distant view of the town from the window of my room; that image hung hazily over what I saw now.

The mountain range in the distance. Where was the one called Asamidai? The river that ran through town was called Yomiyama River. Beyond it I could see the field at North Yomi…

…When I'd gone back to school yesterday, the first thing I'd done was catch Yuya Mochizuki and talk to him.

"Where did everyone go for sixth-period homeroom?"

I asked him the question that had been on my mind, but Mochizuki's answer wasn't very articulate.

"We were talking and so we just headed over to Building S…"

"Building S? You mean the special classrooms?"

"There's a conference room that students can use there, too. We went there and, you know, just talked about stuff."

Talked? *About what?* I wondered.

"I heard you guys made Izumi Akazawa class representative for the girls."

"Oh, yeah."

"Was there a vote or something?"

"Akazawa was nominated. She was the tactical officer before, anyway."

"Tactical officer?" I hadn't heard that title before. "What's that?"

"Oh…uh, well, it just means—"

Mochizuki struggled with his answer a long time.

"We have stuff like that. When the class has some kind of problem, the tactical officer's in charge of thinking up how to deal with it. Kazami does that stuff, too, but…"

This, too, was pretty inarticulate. Trying to tease him a little, I said, "Looks like Ms. Mikami's out again today," and I deliberately added a little sigh. Instantly, Mochizuki's face clouded with worry.

This guy was way too easy to read, or maybe he was too innocent,

or I don't know what. It really made me want to ask "That doesn't bother you, kid?"

It wasn't just Ms. Mikami, though. Mei hadn't shown herself at school the entire day yesterday. And today, there was one other person absent from third-year Class 3: Ikuo Takabayashi. I recalled that Takabayashi had been out back on my first day at school, too, along with Izumi Akazawa. Apparently he had some sort of health problems, so even when he came to school, he always sat out of gym class. Anyway, he seemed dull and hard to talk to, and even though he was my **sit-out buddy**, I had barely ever spoken to him…

8

I couldn't work up any enthusiasm to explore on my way back from the hospital, so I went straight home.

I had just realized that with everything going on, it had been two weeks since I'd talked to my father in India. I ought to call him tonight or maybe tomorrow. Then I could tell him about what had been going on and use that to ask him a little bit about how my mother died fifteen years ago…I was thinking these things over when—

I reached my grandparents' home in Koike around two in the afternoon. When the front gate to the house came into view a little way ahead, I sighed internally.

A middle school–aged boy wearing a summer uniform was loitering in front of the gate, alone. He had a somewhat unsettled air

about him…He kept looking up at the house, then looking down or up at the sky. I didn't have to take a closer look. It was…

"What are you doing here?" I asked him, and he practically jumped in the air, he was so surprised. He turned to look at me, then turned his eyes away in embarrassment. He started to leave without ever saying anything, but I stopped him with a harsh order. "Hold on. What's going on? You had some reason for coming here, didn't you?"

It was Yuya Mochizuki.

He didn't run away after all, but even as I came up to him, he kept his eyes turned away, fidgeting and squirming, and didn't offer any response. When I came even closer, I peered into his face and loaded on another question. "What might that reason be, Mochizuki?"

Then, finally, he spoke: "I was just, uh, worried. My house is near here, in this town, so I thought I might, uh…"

"Worried?" I cocked my head slightly, sarcastically. "What made you worry about me?"

"Uh, well…" Knitting his thin, girlish eyebrows and looking perturbed, Mochizuki dropped his voice. "You weren't at school again today, Sakakibara."

"I had an appointment at the hospital all morning."

"Oh…But still, um…"

"You plan to keep standing around out here talking? Come inside for a second."

I invited him in with a casual tone.

“Wha—? Uh, okay. Just for a second,” Mochizuki agreed, his face a mix of smiling and tears.

It looked as though my grandmother had gone out somewhere. The black Cedric wasn’t in the garage next to the front door. My grandfather was probably with her. I thought Reiko was probably in the side house, but I decided not to announce myself.

I brought Mochizuki around to the backyard, where the porch was. I knew that the glass door to the porch wasn’t locked during the day. It was a level of carelessness unthinkable in Tokyo…But no, I should probably chalk it up to peacefulness.

We sat down next to each other on the edge of the porch, and Mochizuki almost immediately started talking, with a speed that suggested he’d decided to just go for it.

“Sakakibara, ever since you transferred to North Yomi, you must have thought a bunch of stuff here seemed weird.”

“Does that mean you’re going to explain it to me?” I shot back, and Mochizuki’s response died off.

“Er…I…”

“That’s what I thought.”

I glared at him out of the corner of my eyes.

“What horrible secret is everyone getting together to hide from me?”

“That’s…”

Again Mochizuki got stuck, and he was silent for a short while.

“I’m sorry. I guess I can’t say it, after all. It’s just…”

“Just what?”

“Something might happen soon that you’ll think is really unpleasant. It’s actually bad that I’m talking about it like this, but…I couldn’t stay quiet.”

“What does that mean?”

“We **talked about it** at the meeting two days ago…So—”

“You mean the homeroom in sixth period two days ago? When everyone left to go to the conference room?”

“…Yeah.” Mochizuki nodded apologetically. “We knew you were going to be late since you were talking to the police, so that’s how the idea came up. Akazawa and some of the others said we needed to talk without you around. That we should go somewhere else so there wouldn’t be any problems if you came back in the middle of it.”

“Hmph.”

Which meant that Mr. Kubodera had been on board with their suggestion, too.

“…And?”

“I can’t say any more.”

Mochizuki bowed his head and let out a feeble sigh.

“But even if something bad happens to you after this…we need

you to put up with it."

"How can you even say that?"

"Just tell yourself that it's for everyone's benefit. Please."

"For everyone's…?" I offered him the phrase that came to mind just then. "So that's a decision by the class that I have to obey no matter what?"

"…Yeah."

"Hm-m-m. What to do."

I stood up from my seat on the edge of the porch and stretched, reaching toward the slightly cloudy sky. This was the time when I could have actually used Ray's encouragement to "Cheer up!" but this was the one time that she (…probably) was utterly silent in her cage.

"Well, I guess I won't ask you anything more about it, then." I turned to look back at Mochizuki. "But can I ask you a favor, too?"

"What kind?"

"I want a copy of the class list."

Mochizuki looked thrown by that, but he nodded, once, immediately. "You never got one, did you?"

"Nope."

"Then you shouldn't really be asking me for…"

"Listen up, kid," I interrupted him. "I'll worry about me, and I can tell you I've got some pretty touchy emotional issues going on.

So…”

Mochizuki was opening his mouth to reply when a gentle electronic sound played inside the bag resting on his lap. “Oh—” he made a noise, then opened his bag. The next moment, he was holding a silver cell phone.

“I didn’t know you had a cell phone.”

“Kind of. It’s a PHS,” he answered, then accepted the call. After a moment, Mochizuki cried “He *what?!*” sounding very surprised.

I wondered what had happened. I was preparing myself for whatever was coming when I saw the color in Mochizuki’s face drain visibly, the phone still pressed to his ear. Then, at last—

“That was Kazami,” Mochizuki told me, his voice smothered and low—as if he were being crushed flat. “He told me that Takabayashi died. He had a heart attack at his house…”

9

Ikuo Takabayashi.

He’d had a weak heart ever since he was little and had often been out of school. Last year, his condition had gotten much better, but the last two or three days it had taken a sudden downturn until he had an attack that had led to his death.

The sudden death of this classmate, whom I had hardly ever talked to, followed on the death of Ms. Mizuno in the elevator accident at

the hospital. Thus, there were two “deaths of June” for third-year Class 3 this year.

Chapter 8

June III

1

I ran into Ms. Mikami, who had been out of school for so many days, that morning on the stairs. It was the start of the week, Monday, June 8.

It was on the landing between the second and third floors on the East Stair in Building C. I was going up and Ms. Mikami was coming down. It was just slightly before 8:30.

"Oh…Good morning."

Flustered, I gave her an unintentionally awkward greeting. Ms. Mikami came to a stop and looked down at me as if she'd seen something odd, but her eyes shifted immediately away from me and floated unnaturally in space.

"Good morni—um, you're early. The warning bell hasn't even rung yet. Uh, I mean…"

She didn't greet me or respond in any way. I thought it was a little strange, but I couldn't ask her if anything was wrong here in the stairwell, either. There was a brief, incredibly uncomfortable—or rather, embarrassing—moment, and then…

Finally, we went past each other, Ms. Mikami never saying a word. That same instant, the bell began to ring.

Obvious question number one: Why, at this hour, was the teacher *coming down the stairs*? The short homeroom period was starting

now…And yet she was moving away from the classroom, not toward it. Why?

There were still several kids hanging around in the hall on the third floor. But they were all from the neighboring classes, and no one I recognized from Class 3 was among them.

Was Mei here today? I wondered. Was she going to show herself at school, or…?

Thinking about it without really thinking, I opened the door at the back of the classroom.

I was surprised.

This surprise was the exact opposite of the one I'd had last Thursday, when the detectives from the Yomiyama Police Department had released me from questioning and I'd come back to the classroom.

That day, I'd been surprised that not a single person from my class was in the room in the middle of sixth period. This was the opposite…Meaning that even though only the very first morning bell had rung, nearly everyone was in the classroom already, and they were all sitting at their desks, totally disciplined and silent.

"Oh…"

I made a sound inadvertently and a few students turned around to look at me. But they gave no more reaction than that and turned back around right away.

Mr. Kubodera was standing next to the teacher's platform. There were two students standing atop the platform: Tomohiko Kazami and

the new class representative for the girls, Izumi Akazawa.

Extremely confused by the weird atmosphere in the silent classroom, I slowly moved to sit at my own desk.

"So that is what we'll be doing. Are there any…No, we've said enough, I'm sure," Kazami said from the platform. I heard something fearful in his voice. Beside him, Akazawa stood slightly at an angle, her arms across her chest. Something about her looked—to use a slightly anachronistic phrase—like a bandit queen.

I lightly poked the back of the student in front of me, then asked in a whisper, "Did something happen this morning?" But the boy, named Wakui, didn't turn around or respond.

This was why Ms. Mikami had been coming down the stairs, anyway. The lightbulb went on for that, at least. As the assistant teacher, she had been present for this class meeting until a few moments ago, and then…

I swept my eyes furtively around the room.

As expected, Mei wasn't there. There were two other empty seats: Yukari Sakuragi's and—right—the boy who had died suddenly over the weekend, Ikuo Takabayashi's.

Kazami and Akazawa came down from the platform and went back to their seats. Mr. Kubodera took their place in the center of the platform.

"It was a brief two months, but we should all offer our thoughts and prayers for Takabayashi, who studied with us in this room."

Mr. Kubodera strung the words together with a solemn expression

and yet, somehow, sounded as if he were reading an example sentence out of a textbook.

"His memorial service will be at ten o'clock this morning, so Kazami and Akazawa will attend on the class's behalf. I'll be going as well. Should you need anything during that time, please talk to Ms. Mikami. Are there any questions?"

The classroom remained utterly silent.

Though he'd been addressing everyone, Mr. Kubodera was looking at an angle up at the ceiling, and his eyes never moved.

"We've had yet another sad event, but we can all pull through it without losing heart, and certainly without giving up, if everyone works together."

Pull through without giving up? If everyone works together? Hm-m-m. I couldn't quite pinpoint what he meant by that.

"Now then…We must all respect the decision of the class. Even Ms. Mikami, who is in a very difficult position, told us earlier that she would do 'whatever possible.' So…are there any questions?"

After the third repetition of "are there any questions?" Mr. Kubodera lowered his gaze to the students' faces for the first time. Probably every student but me, all probably wearing the same solemn expression as their teacher, nodded deeply.

Ah. So I really hadn't understood what he was getting at. Even so, this was not exactly an atmosphere where I could put my hand up and declare "Question!"…

Right up until he left the classroom a few minutes later, Mr.

Kubodera never once looked my way. I don't think it was my imagination.

2

First period was social studies. When that class ended, I immediately stood up and called to Yuya Mochizuki.

After receiving the phone call two days ago, on Saturday, when he'd learned of Takabayashi's death, he had hurried home, his face ashen. Obviously the news had bothered him. But then—

In a certain sense, his reaction was extremely honest.

He must have heard me call to him, but he didn't react at all. He had looked around, seeming twitchy, then scurried out of the room, as if fleeing from me. It was driving me crazy chasing him down, so I let him go.

What's his deal?

That was all I thought of it at the time. That he really didn't want people to find out that he'd snuck over to my house on Saturday.

But that wasn't the end of it. Between the end of that class and lunch, I became uncomfortably aware of something.

It wasn't just Mochizuki.

For instance, the boy in front of me, Wakui. Before second period started, I poked him in the back again and asked, "Got a second?" But he didn't turn around.

What's up with him? I frowned.

Wakui had chronic asthma, I guess, so he would use a portable inhaler, even during classes. I, at least, had felt a kind of kinship with him as a fellow sufferer of a respiratory condition, and now… What's up with this cold-shoulder treatment?

I was vaguely annoyed, but even so this was nothing more than one example. In other words…

Not a single person in the class came over to talk to me. Even if I tried to talk to them, they didn't react at all, like Wakui, or they left without ever saying a word, like Mochizuki. Even people whom I'd chatted with pretty casually up till last week, like Kazami and Teshigawara and a couple of others.

At lunch, I tried calling Teshigawara on his cell phone. But all I got was the standard message that "This phone may be turned off or in an area without adequate signal…" I tried calling him back three times during the break, and got the message three times. I spotted Mochizuki and called out to him again but, just like after first period, he didn't respond.

And so it went all day.

In the end, I never had a full conversation with anyone from class that day. Really, forget that, I never once had a chance to even be called on during class by a teacher, and pretty much never spoke out loud except to talk to myself. Even if I did talk, no one answered me, and that treatment just went on and on and on.

Given all of that…

I was forced to take a fresh look at things.

To reconsider the alienness (= “enigma”) surrounding Mei Misaki, whether piece by piece or the overall picture of it, that I had detected since first becoming a part of this third-year Class 3 at the beginning of May. To rethink what it meant, which I had almost but never quite managed to grasp all this last month. What lay behind it. And the form of this “reality” that encompassed it all…

3

What became my focus was the question—which shouldn’t have needed asking—of **whether or not Mei Misaki existed**.

Was she there, or wasn’t she?

Was she present in this class, in this world, or wasn’t she?

So many questions that had started to bother me as soon as I transferred here. I couldn’t even start to list them all.

Here was someone that not a single person in the class had any contact with—or even tried to. Thinking back on it now, I had never once seen anyone from class go up to her, or talk to her, or call her name, or even say it out loud.

And the reactions everyone had when, in the midst of this treatment, I approached her or talked about her…

The reactions of Kazami and Teshigawara that first day, for instance, when I had spotted Mei on a bench in front of Building

Zero and talked to her. The reaction of Yukari Sakuragi that same day when I had spoken Mei's name in conversation while we sat out of gym class. The reactions of Teshigawara and Mochizuki—had it been the next day?—when I'd gone into the secondary library after seeing Mei there. And there were others. A lot of others.

In the end, Teshigawara had been thoughtful enough to call and give me a warning.

Quit paying attention to ***things that aren't there.*** *It's dangerous.*

And there was what Ms. Mizuno's little brother Takeru had said to her, too.

He demanded "Why are you asking me that? There's no one like that in my class." He looked totally serious, like I've never seen him before.

Is she actually there?

The way no one made contact with Mei, or even tried to, wasn't limited exclusively to the students. Overall, the teachers involved with third-year Class 3 seemed to do the same.

None of the teachers ever took attendance at the start of class by calling out names. So they never spoke the name "Mei Misaki." I had never yet seen Mei get called on in class to read from the text or solve a problem.

I couldn't fault her for going up to the roof by herself during gym class instead of watching from nearby. Even if she was late to class, or skipped completely, or left in the middle of a test, or was absent for days at a time…Neither the teachers nor the students seemed to

take any notice.

The circumstances under which I first encountered her at the hospital—that had probably helped, and even though I believed it was impossible, there were times when even I considered the possibility of "the **nonexistence** of Mei Misaki."

*Because **I don't exist.***

She'd even said it herself at some point.

To them, I'm invisible. You're the only one who sees me, Sakakibara…what would you do then?

And I had seen firsthand the uncanny way she suddenly appeared and vanished in that basement room in "Twilight of Yomi"…

Maybe Mei Misaki really **isn't there and she doesn't exist**, after all.

Maybe she *is* like a ghost that only I can see and hear, and not real at all.

The fact that her desk was the only one in the whole classroom that was such an incredibly old model and the fact that the name tag pinned to her chest was made of such stained, wrinkly paper seemed to corroborate that idea somehow.

…However.

Thinking about it realistically, no—there was no way such a ridiculous thing could be true. In which case I had to explain all of these various events and facts some other way…In fact, there was a conclusion that **made much more sense, thinking about things**

this way.

Mei Misaki *is* there, she really *does* exist.

But everyone around her **deliberately acts as if there's no such person as Mei Misaki**. That was the conclusion.

I even wondered if this was some sort of "bullying," which you hear so much about. Bullying in the form of every member of the class flat-out ignoring her. But—and I was pretty sure I'd talked to Ms. Mizuno about this, too—even if that were the case, there was still something strange about it.

I'd been dragged into that "Sakakibara" issue last year and had real experience with how terrible that had made me feel. So maybe that was just making me oversensitive. This was totally unlike simple bullying by **snubbing**. This is going to sound vague, but something in the air around this case was very different. Too different.

It could be that they're all afraid of her.

Oh, right. Ms. Mizuno had said something like that, too…

…Anyway.

Did Mei Misaki exist or not?

I pondered over which was true and which was false, but it was incredibly hard to figure out the answer. That was the problem. Unless I took some sort of decisive action.

I had wavered again and again between the two theories, between the opposite extremes, swayed by the situation or my state of mind in the moment. Telling myself that I didn't have any choice. But…

Today, at last, I felt as if I had reached at least one answer thanks to my own visceral experience. I couldn't say I had it all, but I felt as if I understood the "shape" of what lay at its heart.

That being, in other words, **this**. What was happening to me.

Something like **this** must have been happening to Mei this whole time.

To test it out, I stood up from my seat without asking in the middle of sixth-period language arts class and left the room. A minor commotion had popped up across the room momentarily, but Mr. Kubodera didn't say a word to reproach me. Ah. So it was true.

I went over to a window in the hallway and looked up at the rainy sky where low clouds were piling. I was feeling pretty depressed; but on the other hand, my heart felt a little bit lighter.

I thought I now understood "**what is this?**" to a certain degree.

The next question was "**why?**"

4

Exactly as sixth period ended, I went mutely back into the classroom. Mr. Kubodera left without saying anything to me or even sparing me a glance. As if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

I headed to my desk to grab my bag when, by chance, my eyes met Mochizuki's as he was getting his things together to go home. Just like before, he swiftly turned his eyes away; but as he did it, his lips

moved slightly, briefly. I read the word "sorry" in the movement.

Something might happen soon that you'll think is really unpleasant.

The words Mochizuki had spoken to me when I'd seen him on Saturday rose unbidden.

But even if something bad happens to you after this…we need you to put up with it.

He had told me that, looking very serious. Hanging his head and sighing feebly.

Just tell yourself that it's for everyone's benefit. Please.

For everyone's benefit…maybe the answer to "why?" lay there.

I went back to my desk and stuffed my textbook and notes into my bag. Then, checking to make sure I had everything, I glanced inside my desk and—

I noticed something that I had no memory of putting in my desk.

There were two sheets of paper, folded in half.

When I took them out and opened them, a whispered sound escaped me. "Oh—" I looked around quickly, but Mochizuki wasn't in the room.

The two sheets of paper were a copy of the class list for third-year Class 3. Mochizuki must have done this, giving me what I'd asked him for on Saturday…

On the back of the first sheet, he had written something in green

pen. His handwriting was pretty bad, and it was all scribbly…but I could just barely make out what he'd written there.

I'm sorry. Ask Misaki what's going on.

I looked around one more time, then consciously lowered my voice and murmured, "Okay."

He had clearly written "Misaki" on the paper. Her name was being conveyed to me point-blank by a third party in the class. The existence of "Mei Misaki" was being directly acknowledged. This was the first time that had happened, I do believe.

Mei is there after all. She really *does* exist.

When I came to my senses, I fought back fiercely against the growing threat of tears.

I turned the paper over to the front and checked the list of students' names. I found it right away.

The name "Mei Misaki" was written there, unmistakably. But it was written between two rows and her address and phone number, written beside her name, were struck through with two lines. What did this mean? How was I supposed to interpret that?

Despite the strike-through, I could read the address and phone number written there easily enough.

4-4 Misaki, Yomiyama

That was Mei Misaki's address.

Obviously I knew the name of the town "Misaki," and I also had some recollection of the area in the "4-4" block. I was pretty sure of it.

"Blue Eyes Empty to All, in the Twilight of Yomi"—the building with that doll gallery—was, in fact, Mei's house.

5

A woman who might have been Mei's mother answered the phone.

"Um, is Misaki…is Mei there? My name is Sakakibara. I'm in her class."

"I'm sorry?" she replied, her voice sounding slightly taken aback, or maybe uneasy. "Sakakibara, you said?"

"Koichi Sakakibara, yes. I'm in the third-year Class 3 at North Yomi with…Um, this *is* the Misaki household, right?"

"It is…"

"Um, is Mei there right now?"

"I'm not sure…"

"She didn't come to school today, so…uh, if she's there, could you put her on the line?"

Once I'd figured out her address and phone number, there was no way I was putting this off. I left the school building and went to an unfrequented corner of the schoolyard, where I had quickly dialed the number on the class list on my cell phone.

The woman who might have been her mother stalled, sounding more than a little confused. "I'm not sure."

I gave her one more push. "Please, ma'am."

After a moment she said, "All right. Hold on a moment, please."

There was a long pause after that, and I listened to a crackly version of *Für Elise* (even I know the name of that song) play on a loop, until finally…

"Hello?"

I heard Mei's voice in my ear. My grip tightened on my cell phone.

"Uh, this is Sakakibara. Sorry to call you out of the blue like this."

There was a weird pause of two or three seconds; then she curtly asked, "What do you want?"

"I want to see you," I replied, refusing to waver. "There's something I want to ask you about."

"You have something to ask me?"

“Yeah.” I followed that up right away: “That place is your house, huh? That doll gallery in Misaki.”

“I thought you already knew that.”

“In the back of my mind, maybe…but I wasn’t sure until I saw the class list. Mochizuki gave me a copy. But he told me to ask you what’s going on.”

“Oh, really?”

Her reaction was apathetic—or more like a deliberate play at being uninterested. In contrast, I just got louder.

“Did you hear that Ikuo Takabayashi died?”

“What?!”

This time I got the right reaction: a short burst of surprise. Apparently she hadn’t heard about him.

“It was sudden, on Saturday afternoon, of a heart attack. Though they said he’d always been pretty sick.”

“…Oh.” She had returned to her distant demeanor, even more staunchly than before, it seemed. “The second one to die in June.”

The second one to die in June. Meaning that Ms. Mizuno had been the first?

“And then today…” I went on, undaunted. “When I went to school, the class was acting weird. It was like everyone had agreed to act like I wasn’t there.”

“You?”

“Yeah. The whole day, as soon as I got there. So I figured, maybe it’s the same as what they’re doing to you…”

A brief silence intervened, and then at last—“So they decided to try **that**,” Mei said, her voice a heavy sigh.

“What do you mean?” I asked, putting force behind my words. “Why…Why would they all do something like this?”

I tried waiting the length of her previous silence, but there was no answer. This time I held my voice in check more.

“Anyway…that’s why I want to see you and ask you what’s going on.”

No answer.

“Come on, can we meet up?”

Still nothing.

“Come on, Misaki…”

“Fine.” Her voice was thin when she answered. “Where are you right now?”

“Still at school. I’m just about to leave.”

“Then why don’t you come here? You know how to get here, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Okay. In about thirty minutes, then, I’d say. In the room in the basement. All right?”

“Perfect. I’m leaving now.”

“I’ll tell Grandma Amane you’re coming. I’ll be waiting.”

“Amane” was written with the characters for “at the root of heaven”—that was something I found out later. The word “Grandma” reminded me immediately of the old woman greeting visitors at the table next to the entrance.

6

And so it was that I visited “Blue Eyes Empty to All, in the Twilight of Yomi” for the third time.

The doorbell ringing dully. The voice of the white-haired old woman greeting me. The twilight dimness within the gallery at the cusp of sunset…

“Mei is downstairs,” the old woman said when she saw my face. “You go on in. No need to pay the fee.”

There were no visitors in the gallery on the first floor.

There aren’t any other customers right now, anyway…

Right. The old woman had twice told me that, the two times I’d been here before. That ***there weren’t any other customers…*** and yet.

When I’d gone down to the basement, Mei had been there both times.

I had felt a slight nagging in my mind about why that could be, and I’d found it strange…and because of that my mind had been

inclined, however slightly, toward the "nonexistence of Mei Misaki."

But the answer had been the simplest thing imaginable.

Now that I knew, there was nothing strange about it at all. There hadn't been any secret meaning in the old woman's words; she had simply given me **the bare facts** at the time.

There aren't any other customers anyway…

She'd been exactly right.

Because Mei wasn't a customer. This building, including this gallery—this was her home.

I slipped between the ranks of dolls on quiet steps, heading for the back staircase. Once again consciously taking deep breaths for the lifeless dolls.

The music playing in the museum today was not string music: it was a haunting female vocalist. The lyrics, backed by an equally haunting melody, weren't in English or Japanese. It might have been French.

It was a little before four in the afternoon. And in the display room in the crypt-like basement, sunk in a greater chill than the first floor, in the very center of the room—

Mei stood, alone. Wearing a thick, black long-sleeved shirt and black jeans, this was the first time I'd seen her dressed in anything other than her school uniform.

Fighting back the tension rising uncontrollably within me, I raised

a hand in a casual wave. “Hey.”

“Well?” she asked me with the faintest of smiles. “How does it feel to not exist?”

“It doesn’t feel great,” I replied, deliberately pursing my lips at her. “But…even so, I kind of feel like a weight is lifted.”

“Oh? And why’s that?”

“Because now I know that *Mei Misaki exists*.”

However…

Even so, it could be that the girl who’s here in front of me really truly **isn’t there**…The doubt flitted through my mind, whisper though it was.

I blinked harshly to banish the thought, then fixed my eyes squarely on Mei and took a step closer.

“The first time I met you here—” I spoke the words just so I could hear myself say them. “You told me, ‘I come down here sometimes. Since I don’t hate it in here.’ That day, you didn’t have your bag with you, even though you had just come from school…which tells me that ordinarily you live on the upper floors of this building and ‘come down here sometimes.’ That day, you came home and put down your bag, and then, because you were in the mood, you came down here.”

“Obviously.”

Another faint smile touched Mei’s face as she nodded. I went on. “When I asked you if you lived nearby, you told me, ‘Well, yeah.’

That was…”

“Look, we use the third floor of this building as our house. There’s nothing wrong with saying that’s ‘nearby,’ is there?”

Yeah, so that was what she’d meant.

“That old woman who’s always next to the door—you called her ‘Grandma Amane’?”

“She’s my mom’s aunt. Which makes her my great-aunt. My mom’s mom died young, so as far as I’m concerned, she’s like my grandma.”

Mei spoke diffidently, and without faltering.

“Bright lights aren’t good for her eyes, so she started wearing those glasses all the time. She says she can tell people apart just fine, so I guess it doesn’t affect her work.”

“Was that your mom on the phone?”

“You surprised her. I never get phone calls from kids at school.”

“Oh. Um, maybe I’m just imagining things, but is your mom, uh…”

“Is she what?”

“I mean, is your mom the one who made the dolls here? That Kirika person?”

“Yeah.” Mei nodded without apology. “Kirika is her stage name, I guess you could say. Her real name is a lot more common. She spends most of the day holed up in that workshop on the second

floor, making dolls and painting pictures and whatever else. She's a weirdo."

"Does the 'M' in 'Studio M' stand for Misaki?"

"Not so complicated, huh?"

That middle-aged woman in the marigold-colored clothes who'd been on the landing of the outside stairs the second time I'd come here. I had already figured she was involved with the doll studio, but could that have been Mei's mother—the doll maker Kirika herself?

"What about your dad?"

Mei's eyes slipped away. "Same as yours," she replied.

"You mean…he's overseas?"

"I think he's in Germany right now. He's out of Japan more than half the year, and then he's in Tokyo for more than half of what's left."

"Does he work in trade or something?"

"I dunno. I'm not really clear on what his job is. But I guess he's got tons of money, because he built this place and lets my mom do whatever she wants."

"Wow."

"You could call us a family, but it doesn't feel very connected. Which is fine."

The fog, like watery ink, that had always surrounded the character of Mei Misaki. For some reason I felt faintly confused at the

realization that it was lifting slightly.

"You want to go to the third floor?" Mei asked. "Or did you want to keep talking here?"

"Uh, that's okay."

"You can't really handle this place, can you, Sakakibara?"

"It's not that I can't handle it—"

"But you're not used to it yet, are you? To the air in a place packed with the emptiness of the dolls? You must have a lot more questions."

"Um, yeah, I do."

"Then…"

Mei turned silently on her heel. She started to walk off toward the back of the room. She went to one side of the black coffin that held the doll of the young girl that looked so like her; then she disappeared. Lagging by several beats, I hurried after her.

Behind the coffin, the deep red curtain hanging over the wall was swaying slightly again today, in the breeze from the air-conditioning.

Mei glanced back at me, then pulled the curtain open without a word. And there—

A cream-colored steel door.

There was a rectangular plastic button on the wall beside the door.

"Did you know this was here?" Mei asked as she pushed the

button.

I nodded to her, my face scrunched up. “When I came over before, you disappeared back here. So I checked behind the curtain that day.”

With the low whir of a motor, the iron doors opened to either side. It was the door to an elevator that linked the basement with the upper floors.

“Come along, Sakakibara.” Mei got into the elevator, then gestured for me to join her. “We can talk things over upstairs.”

7

Three black leather sofas were set around a low glass-topped table. There was one two-seater and two single-seaters. After plopping into one of the single-seaters, Mei gave a short sigh and then looked at me.

“Go ahead. Sit down, at least.”

“Oh…right.”

“Do you want anything to drink?”

“Uh, no…I’m fine.”

“I’m thirsty. Do you want lemon tea? Tea with milk?”

“Um, whichever.”

We’d come up to the third floor on the elevator, to the Misaki

family home. My first impression was how the place seemed barely lived in, if at all.

We'd moved to the spacious living/dining room. The furniture was unpleasantly sparse for the amount of space they had and, to top it off, every detail of the room was too precisely arranged. Even the carelessness of the TV remote being tossed into the center of the table seemed unnatural.

The windows were all closed and the air-conditioning was on. It was still only early June, but the air-conditioning was running surprisingly hard.

Mei stood up from the sofa and went into the kitchen, then immediately returned with two cans of black tea. "Here." She set one can in front of me. Then, pulling the tab off her own can, she plopped back down on the sofa.

"So?" Mei took a swig of the tea, then looked at me with a cool gaze. "What do you want to talk about first?"

"Uh…well."

"Why don't you ask me questions? Maybe that'll be easier."

"I thought you hated being interrogated."

"I do hate it. But today, I'll allow it."

Mei spoke in a teacherly tone, then smiled in amusement. Drawn in, my tension was easing, but I quickly got on the ball and straightened my posture.

"All right. Let me just confirm something again," I said. "Mei

Misaki—you're *alive*, right?"

"Did you think maybe I was a ghost?"

"I'm not going to say I didn't have doubts sometimes, to be honest."

"I guess I can't blame you." Mei smiled in amusement again. "But now all your doubts are gone, I hope. If we're talking on the level of whether or not I exist, then absolutely, I'm *alive*. A real, flesh-and-blood human being. The only people who think I'm 'not there' are the ones in third-year Class 3 at North Yomi. Though actually, that was supposed to have included you, too, Sakakibara."

"Me?"

"Yeah. But that failed pretty early on. Now you're like me and… It's hard to explain."

I noted down the words that stuck out to me—"failed," "like me"—in a corner of my mind and asked Mei another question. "When did it start? When did everyone in class start **pretending** that no student named Mei Misaki existed? Has it always been that way?"

"What do you mean, always?"

"Like, as soon as you started third year? Or before that?"

"Once we joined third-year Class 3, of course. But it wasn't right away."

There was no longer a smile on Mei's face as she answered.

"When the new semester had just started, we thought this year

was going to be an '**off** year.' But then we found out it probably wasn't going to be, and the discussions wrapped up in April…So, to be accurate, it started on May first."

"May first?"

"You got out of the hospital and first came to North Yomi on the sixth, right?"

"Yeah."

"Friday the week before that was the first day. There was a three-day weekend after that, so effectively, that was the third day."

It had started that recently? That threw me for quite a loop. I had gotten the idea somehow that this had been going on longer—at least before I came to this town—and in a sustained way.

"A lot of stuff must have seemed strange to you after that first day."

"Well, that's true." I nodded deeply to underscore her comment. "Every time I talked to you or said your name, Kazami and Teshigawara…everyone around me would react so weirdly. It looked like they wanted to say something, but nobody ever did."

"They wanted to tell you, but they just couldn't do it. I think that's how it turned out. They wound up cutting their own throats. They should have told you everything before you came to school. They're paying for it now."

"What do you mean?"

"You should have done like everyone else and treated me like I'm

‘not there.’ **It doesn’t work** otherwise…but up till then, I don’t think any of them were taking it that seriously. Remember what I told you? How even I only half-believed it, deep down. How…I didn’t buy into it a hundred percent.”

She was right; I did remember her saying those words, but…

“It’s not just ‘bullying,’ is it?”

I pushed on with my questions.

“No. I don’t think anyone is thinking of it like that.”

“…So then why are you the target?”

Mei cocked her head slightly. “Who knows? It’s kind of just the way things worked out. But I never interacted much with anyone anyway, and plus my name just happens to be Misaki, too…So maybe it seemed perfect. In a way, it almost makes things easier for me, too.”

“Easier? You can’t—”

“I can’t mean that?”

“That’s right, you can’t. There’s no way it’s a good thing that the kids in class, and even the teachers, are ganging up and ignoring a single student.”

My voice grew rougher as I spoke, but Mei let it wash past her.

“I’m pretty sure that the teachers who deal with Class 3 spread the word through different channels than the students.”

Her tone was stubbornly detached.

“For example, not taking class attendance by roll call. There are teachers who do roll call in other classes. But they don’t do it in Class 3. You know, so they don’t have to call my name. Class 3 is the only one that doesn’t have to ‘stand’ and ‘greet,’ too. It’s the same reason the teachers never go down the rows and call on us in order, no matter what class we’re in. I will never be called on, and if I’m absent or I leave halfway through the class, no one’s going to say a word about it. And I’m excused from all cleaning rotations and everything else. The teachers reached that understanding amongst themselves. And when the midterms rolled around, I guess they weren’t allowed to excuse me from that, but they didn’t care how lazy I was when I filled out answer sheets just to get out of there, did they? Just like everything else…”

“So gym class, too, then?”

“Gym class what?”

“Since they split gym class into boys and girls, I heard that Class 1 and 2 have gym together and Class 4 and 5 have their gym together, but Class 3 is the only one by itself. I thought that was kind of weird. You could argue that one class has to be the odd one out since there’s an uneven number, but why would it be Class 3?”

“So other classes don’t get pulled in. So the number of students affected doesn’t go up. Maybe they do it out of some kind of concern like that. Although there’s always been an ‘arrangement’ for gym class that the person who’s ‘not there’ doesn’t participate and sits out whenever they can.”

“An arrangement, huh?”

That word called up a memory.

Obey whatever the class decides.

The third "North Yomi fundamental" that Reiko had taught me. And then last week, Thursday, when the classroom was empty, Mr. Kubodera had said…

We need to obey whatever the class decides, without fail. All right?

I let out a deep sigh, feeling overwhelmed, and reached for the can of tea Mei had brought me. It was bitingly cold lemon tea. I pulled the tab off the top and drank half the can in one go.

"If we go through listing every single thing, I don't think we're ever going to finish."

I looked back at Mei's face.

"Basically, the same thing that's been happening to you since the beginning of May started happening to me this morning. So with everything I went through today, I felt like I had a pretty good idea of **what was going on**. But the thing I still don't understand is **why are they doing it?**"

Yes. The question was "why?"

It wasn't simple "bullying." Mei, the one going through it, had even said so. And I agreed. But on the other hand…

The students and the teachers had agreed to treat one particular student as if they're "not there." In a normal context, no, that wasn't "simple" bullying. It was heinous, over-the-top bullying. That was

why my voice had gotten so raw before when I said, “There’s no way doing something like that is a good thing.” But…

Thinking about this by forcing the word or the concept of “bullying” onto it, at least, was wrong; it didn’t make sense. That fact was inescapable.

There was probably no malice in what they were doing, whether student or teacher, like in so-called bullying. If there was no contempt or mockery of their target, then there was also no intent to try and strengthen their group ties by singling her out…That’s how I thought of it.

What they had instead was fear and dread…That’s also how I saw it.

Before, I’d thought they were afraid of Mei, but it wasn’t that. Rather, it was like fear and dread not of Mei herself, but of **something they couldn’t see…**

“Everyone’s desperate now,” Mei said.

“Desperate?”

“Sakuragi and her mother died in those accidents in May, so they couldn’t say they only half-believed it anymore. And then once June started, there were two more. **It’s begun**, for sure.”

…Which didn’t explain much.

“So then…I mean, why is that?” I asked, each word a gasp for oxygen to my depleted lungs. “How is any of that related to anything else? Why would that make everyone gang up on someone and act like they’re ‘not there’? It’s so pointless.”

“Why? You really think that, don’t you?”

“I do.”

The short sleeves of my summer uniform exposed my arms, which had been covered in goose bumps for some time now. And it wasn’t going away. And not just because the air-conditioning was too cold.

“Do you remember the story about Misaki from twenty-six years ago?” Mei asked at length, covering the eye patch on her left eye with the palm of her left hand, as if to hide it.

Twenty-six years ago?…Ah, so this really did have something to do with that.

“Of course,” I replied, leaning forward on the sofa.

Her hand still resting over her eye patch, Mei’s voice was quiet as she told the story.

“Misaki, the popular kid in third-year Class 3, died and everyone kept **pretending** that ‘Misaki’s still alive anyway’…And then on graduation day, the image of Misaki, who couldn’t possibly have been there, showed up in the class photo. I think that’s as far as we got.”

“Yeah.”

“You still don’t know the rest?”

“No one will tell me.”

“Then I’ll tell you now,” Mei said, moistening her lips with a flick of her pink tongue. “What happened twenty-six years ago was the trigger, and ever since, third-year Class 3 at North Yomi has

drawn nearer to 'death.'"

"Nearer to death…?"

Actually, on my first day at school, Mei had said something similar when I'd talked with her on the roof of Building C. I still remembered it vividly.

Third-year Class 3 is the closest to death. More than any other class at any other school. Much more.

"What does that mean?"

I inclined my head, rubbing my arms briskly.

"The first time **something** happened, twenty-five years ago, Misaki's classmates had all graduated. It was the third-year Class 3 that came after them. **The same thing** started to happen after that, though it doesn't happen every year. Maybe about once every two years."

"And that is…?"

"I'm going to tell it the way I've seen it, but don't get the wrong idea: I've heard all of this from other people. This has been passed on through lots of people over a lot of years."

So basically, some kind of legend—the situation made it impossible to write the whole thing off as just that. I nodded solemnly, my eyes fixed on Mei's lips.

"The students have their own channels for handing the story down among themselves, separate from the teachers'. Last year's third-year Class 3 tells next year's third-year Class 3. That's how I first found

out about most of this. This stuff goes around in the other classes and the other years kind of like a rumor, but at its root, this is a secret that only people involved in third-year Class 3 know, that they absolutely cannot talk about to anyone else. So…"

"Come on, what *is* it?"

I couldn't stop chafing my arms. The goose bumps just wouldn't go away.

"**A mysterious event** that first happened to the third-year Class 3 twenty-five years ago," Mei said, flinging the words out. Then she broke off and my breath caught. "When **that** happened—when it started, I mean—there was at least one death every month, without exception, in third-year Class 3 that year. Sometimes it was the students, sometimes it was their families. There were accidents and illnesses, sometimes a suicide, or they would be involved in some kind of accident. There were people who said it had to be a curse."

A curse…"The curse of third-year Class 3," huh?

"What is it?" I asked again. "What is this 'mysterious event'?"

"Well—" Mei finally dropped her hand from her eye patch and replied, "**There's one extra kid in the class.** No one notices when they get added. There's an extra person, and no one has any way of telling who it is."

8

"There's one extra person?" I repeated it back to her, not

understanding. “Someone had to have…”

“I told you, we don’t know who it is,” Mei answered, her expression unmoving. “It first happened twenty-five years ago. April 1973. As soon as the new semester started, they realized they were one desk short in the classroom. They thought they’d gotten enough desks ready for the number of students in the class that year. And yet when they tried to start class, they realized they were one short.”

“And that was because the number of students had gone up?”

“Yeah. But you can’t tell who the extra kid is. You can ask everyone, but no one will say it’s them, and no one else knows, either.”

“…Even so.” Unable to grasp this idea, I cut in with the most obvious of questions. “Can’t they look something like that up on the class list or in the school records?”

“It doesn’t work. No matter where they look, the class list, all kinds of records, everything seems to match up. More like, **they can’t tell that the records don’t match up**, because things are changed—like, tampered with—so they can’t prove anything. So they’re just short one desk.”

“Tampered? So someone secretly doctors the records?”

“‘Tampered’ is a metaphor. See, it’s not just the records. Everyone’s memories get altered, too.”

“Uh-h-h?”

“You don’t think that’s possible, do you?”

"Well…no."

"But apparently it's true."

As she responded, Mei looked extremely confused about how to explain it. "It isn't anything a person could have done. **That's the kind of 'phenomenon' it is.** At least, that's how *someone* explained it to me."

"A phenomenon…"

Argh…I could barely understand what she was telling me.

Tampering with the records? Altering people's memories? That kind of thing was totally…

When someone dies, there's a funeral.

I don't know why, but out of nowhere, my grandfather's papery voice played in my ears. With it came a strange, low-frequency sound, ***Vmmmmm***…as if obscuring his words.

I don't...I don't want to go to any more funerals.

"At first, they all thought someone had screwed up, so they dug up an extra desk and chair and forgot about it. I suppose that's natural. It's not something that would normally occur to anyone, the number of students going up by one without anyone noticing. No one took the possibility seriously. But then…"

Her right eye, not hidden by the eye patch, slowly closed and then opened again.

"Like I said, starting that April, people linked to the class started to die each month. This is an indisputable fact."

“Every month…for a whole year?”

“For 1973, I think it was six students and ten family members. That’s not exactly normal.”

“…No.” I couldn’t disagree with that. “If that really did happen…”

Sixteen people in one year. I knew that number was definitely out of the ordinary.

Mei slowly closed and then opened her right eye again, then went on. “And then—the same thing happened the year after that, too. When the new semester started, they were one desk short and every month someone died…And by then the people in the middle of it knew it couldn’t be anything ordinary. Some people even said that it must be a curse…”

A curse…“The curse of third-year Class 3.”

“If it’s a ‘curse,’ then where did it come from?” I asked, and Mei replied calmly as follows:

“It was the curse of Misaki, who’d died twenty-six years ago.”

“Why would Misaki put a curse on anyone?” I pressed. “It’s not like Misaki had any really horrible experiences in class or anything, right? Everyone was sad about the sudden death of such a popular kid…weren’t they? And Misaki cursed them anyway?”

“It is strange, isn’t it? I think so, too. That’s why *someone* told me that this is different from what you’d call a curse.”

“Who’s ‘someone’?”

It was starting to bug me, so I thought I'd ask. Mei didn't answer and instead started to press ahead with the story. "So then…"

"Wait." I stopped her and pressed a thumb against my left temple. "Let me organize this a little. Twenty-six years ago, Misaki from third-year Class 3 died. The next year there was an 'extra person' in the class, but no one knew who it was. Then, every month, the kids in the class or their family members started to die. I mean, what exactly is the logic tying this stuff together? Why do people die when there's **someone** extra? Why would…"

"I don't know any formal logic for it." Mei gave a slight shake of the head. "I'm not really a specialist in this issue. It's just that after all the stuff that's happened up till now, I dunno, I've got a picture that's come together from experience. Everyone involved knows the story since it gets handed down every year."

She lowered her voice a bit before saying, "The **someone** extra is 'the casualty.'"

9

"…What?"

The tip of my thumb pressed even harder into my temple.

"Um, is that…You mean, Misaki who died twenty-six years ago?"

"No, it doesn't work like that." Mei gave another small shake of her head. "It's not Misaki. It's some other 'casualty.'"

“Casualty…”

The words scratched into Mei’s desk in the classroom—

Who is “the casualty”?

The words flashed dubiously through my mind.

“It was everyone in the third-year Class 3 twenty-six years ago **acting that way** that started all this. They decided that their dead classmate Misaki ‘wasn’t dead anyway’ and ‘was actually still alive, right over there,’ and kept the act going the whole year. The result was that when they took a photo in the classroom the day of graduation, it showed Misaki, who couldn’t have been present in the living world. If you think about it, ‘the casualty’ had been called back to them.”

Mei went on, her expression as static as ever.

“Meaning…maybe that was the trigger and that’s why the third-year Class 3 at North Yomi is ‘closer to death.’ Maybe it became a site, like a vessel that draws ‘the casualty’ in. It’s something like that.”

“It draws the casualty in?”

“Yeah. Obviously there’s no rational explanation for it, but still **that’s what started to happen**. That’s how the story goes.”

Just like the other time she’d told me of this, surrounded by the dolls in the basement, Mei had at some point shifted to a tone that

suggested the secrets of the world lay exposed before her.

"'The casualty' is part of the class because the entire class is closer to death. I suppose you could look at it the other way, too. Since the casualty got mixed up in the class, we came closer to death. Whichever way it is—are you listening, Sakakibara?—'death' is emptiness. Just like the dolls. If you get too close to it, it sucks you in. That's why…"

"That's why someone dies every month?"

"Try thinking about it like this," Mei said. "I came up with this on my own, though. The closer we get to death, **the easier it is for people to die** compared to a 'site' that's not like that."

"What does that mean?"

"For example, even if you go about your daily life the same way, you're more likely to have an accident. Even in the same accident, you're more likely to get badly hurt. Even with the same injuries, you're more likely to die from them. Like that."

"Ah…"

So this stuff popped up in all different facets of life like a risk bias and kept building up until at some point it yanked you once and for all into death? Was she asking me to interpret it like that?

So was that why Yukari Sakuragi had met such a string of unfortunate accidents and lost her life? And why Ms. Mizuno had died in that elevator accident?

"…But that doesn't—"

That doesn't make sense, I thought.

How could anyone believe that? It was utterly unacceptable in a thought process based on common sense. I couldn't possibly…

Hey, Sakakibara, d'you believe in ghosts or curses or whatever? Is that your thing?

In the midst of my intense confusion, several scenes came back to me.

So-called paranormal phenomena, in general?

That was the unprovoked grilling I'd received from Teshigawara and Kazami at lunch on my first day at school. Had they been feeling me out with those questions? In order to lay the groundwork for revealing **this issue** to the transfer student?

And yet they had never gone into any more profound details…

…Of course.

That was because I'd spotted Mei right then, sitting on a bench across from a flowerbed in front of Building Zero. I'd ignored their alarmed reactions and headed over to her…Was that why?

"Um, do you mind if I ask you a couple things I don't really get?" I asked, moving my finger from my temple.

"Go ahead," Mei replied, stroking the eye patch over her left eye. "But I'm not an expert. There's a lot I don't really understand, either."

"Okay." I nodded and straightened my back. "Um, first of all… You said that the one **extra** person is 'the casualty,' right? Does that

mean they're like a ghost?"

"Well." Mei's head tilted to one side. "It's probably not like the usual image of a 'ghost' that's out there. It's not just an ethereal presence. It has a physical body, they say."

"A physical body…"

"It's kind of a strange thing to say, but 'the casualty' is no different from a living person. It has its own flesh-body."

"So, like a zombie, then?"

"Well…" Mei's head tilted to one side again as she looked back into my face. "I think it's different. They don't hunt people down or eat them or anything."

"Probably not, huh?"

"And when people die every month, it isn't as if 'the casualty' reached out with its own hands to kill them. The casualty has feelings and it has enough memories to integrate into the situation, and it has no idea at all that it's 'the casualty.' That's why you can't tell who they are."

"Hm-m-m. So then—" My question drew together slowly. "At some point or other it becomes clear who the 'extra person' mixed into the class that year was, right?"

"That—yeah. They say you find out after graduation is over."

"How do you find out?"

"Because the extra person disappears. They say the records and memories of the person go back to the way they were, too."

“What kind of person gets mixed up in the class as the casualty, exactly? Has it ever been someone without any link or association to the class?”

“I dunno…Oh, but there is kind of a rule for it.”

“A rule?”

“It’s a person who’s died as part of this phenomenon before. Whether it’s an actual student from third-year Class 3 or their little brother or sister or…”

“Then who could it have been that first time, twenty-five years ago? Was it Misaki, since they’d died the year before? But then wouldn’t someone have…”

Someone would have realized “Misaki’s here,” wouldn’t they? Maybe that thought was proof that I just couldn’t let go of “rational thinking.”

“A lot of the changes and tampering happen all on their own, so I don’t think it would have seemed strange even if it were Misaki,” Mei responded. “But I heard that’s not what happened that year.”

“Then who was it?”

“Misaki’s little brother or sister. They’d died at the same time Misaki did…and they were one year younger than Misaki, so they would have been a third-year that year.”

“Misaki’s little brother or sister…I see.” I spoke the words myself then and couldn’t help acknowledging it. “You’re saying that for a whole year, no one—not the teachers and not the students—noticed that this kid who had died the year before was in the class and they

just accepted it as reality?"

"That's what I'm saying."

Mei nodded, then let out a long sigh and shut her eyes, the very picture of exhaustion. Two seconds, then three, went by before she murmured, "Ah, but—" and opened her right eye a slit. "No matter how much I try to explain it, it's a hard story to pin down when you start thinking about it."

"How come?"

"Well…" Mei mulled over her words, but when she spoke they came with hardly any hesitation at all: "After a year where **that** happens, obviously the fact remains that a lot of people died, but they say that people's memories about **the event itself** fade. Especially about who was 'the extra person' in the class. There's some difference between people, and some people forget right away, but in most cases the memory becomes hazier over time until eventually…"

"They forget?"

"I heard this example from **someone**.

"Suppose a levee breaks and water from the river floods the town. It's like the water is finally receding. The fact that there was a flood remains, unquestionably, but after the water recedes, the memory of what got flooded and how badly starts to get fuzzy. It's like that. It's more that they can't help forgetting, not that they're forced to forget, I guess.

"Twenty-five years ago is like a fairy tale since it's before we

were born, but in a global sense it wasn't that long ago. But when the memories of the people involved fade like that, it's like you said before, Sakakibara. It's become a total legend now."

At that, a corner of Mei's mouth softened, but her expression froze again right away.

"Until the end of my second year, I'd only caught snatches of rumors. After they decided the classes for third-years, they called a meeting right away, and a couple of the kids from Class 3 the year before who were graduating were there, too. There was kind of a 'torch-passing' about this issue. That was the first time I heard the reality of the 'legend'…"

Her tone of smothered emotion never faltered, but for her, it sounded as if there was all sorts of chaos in her heart.

"They explained it to us and I realized that this wasn't a lie or a joke: that maybe we had to take this seriously. Even so, deep down I only half-believed it. As for everyone else, there were some kids who believed it completely and some who didn't really buy it…"

A lighthearted tune cut through the room, playing in the oval clock that hung over the TV to tell the time. Six o'clock. It was that late already?

I wouldn't be surprised to start getting worried phone calls from my grandmother asking "Where are you? Are you all right?"

What an awful machine.

I remembered Mei's comment, whenever it had been.

No matter where you are, you're connected. They can catch you.

I turned off the cell phone, still in the pocket of my pants.

"That's a rough outline of what we talked about," Mei said, then rested her slight chin in both hands. "You want to hear the rest?"

"Uh, yeah. That'd be…"

How could I not want to? Come on.

"Will you tell me?" I asked, straightening my back again.

10

"Ever since twenty-five years ago, this 'abnormal phenomenon' has kept happening, although not necessarily every year. As you might expect, people have tried to come up with something to counteract it."

Mei began to tell me "the rest." Her tone was as detached as ever, and still suggested that even she needed to grope for words.

"But something as insane as this, so completely incompatible with real-world logic…maybe you could call it supernatural…this kind of story could never be discussed by an official school administration."

"That's for sure."

"So as a first step, at least, discussions at the local level, at the level of those directly involved in 'the curse of third-year Class 3,' have been at the core of all kinds of strategies that people have considered."

“Like an exorcism?”

It was the simplest strategy that had occurred to me so far.

“They may have tried that,” Mei replied without the slightest of smiles. “Changing classrooms, for example. They tried switching from the room they’d used in the old building—Building Zero—for third-year Class 3 every year up till then. Thinking maybe the curse was tied to **that spot, to the classroom**.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But it didn’t do any good. They built a new school building and moved the third-year classrooms from Building Zero to Building C thirteen years ago. Apparently they were hoping that would be the end of it. But of course it didn’t end.”

“So you’re saying it wasn’t the classroom or the school building; it was purely **the third-year Class 3 group** that was the problem?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

She replied much as she had earlier, then let out another long sigh and shut her eyes.

For just a moment, I thought the cold of the overly air-conditioned room would turn her breath white. Without realizing it, I had begun rubbing my arms again.

“And this is where I suppose we finally get to the heart of things,” Mei said, gently opening her right eye. “They say it happened ten years ago. It’s not really clear if someone got the idea and spoke up about it or what, but they found **a strategy that was effective**

against these events. If you do this, you'll be able to avoid disaster—a strategy that makes it so people don't start dying every month."

"Oh…"

It was at that point that **a vague image** came into my mind of what sort of "strategy" Mei was talking about. That's why. That. Meaning…

"We treat someone like they're 'not there' in place of the 'extra person.'"

The words that came from Mei's lips were exactly what I had imagined.

"That way you bring the class back to the number of people it's supposed to have. You balance the books. That's how you prevent disaster for that year…with that **talisman**."

Interlude II

Looks like this year was an "off year." Thank goodness.

When they started school, there were exactly thirty desks, and all of them were full…

We didn't have anyone extra.

What a huge relief.

It was an "off year" last year, too, remember? Have there ever been two years in a row that **nothing happened**?

Isn't it enough that it happened to us?

Totally. Maybe it's getting weaker.

Still…I wonder if it's true that **once *that* starts, someone with ties to our class dies every month**. I just find it so hard to believe, still.

But come on, **they even had that "torch-passing,"** so it's not exactly a baseless story, is it?

Plus, there were a couple third-year students who died two years ago, remember? Accidents or suicide or whatever. And a couple people in their families…

That's true, but…

That's so scary, that your family can get dragged in, too.

It's your parents and siblings that are really in trouble. They told us there's that rule, that everyone related to you by blood

within two degrees is fair game.

Within two degrees? So like, my grandma and grandpa, too?

That's what I heard.

They said they're safe if they're more distant, like aunts and uncles and **cousins**.

What about that part where **if you don't live in this town, you're safe**?

Oh, I heard that, too.

Me, too. So then if it came to that, you could leave town…

But come on.

You can't exactly do that when you're still in middle school.

Even if I told my parents, I bet you they wouldn't believe me.

But hey, *it didn't happen* this year, so why worry about it?

I'm so relieved, seriously.

If we'd had someone extra, we would've had to treat someone like they're "not there," right?

That sounds so stressful.

When that happens, the teachers help you, though…

…Sounds complicated.

Who d'you think would've been "not there"?

The tactical officers pick a "candidate," don't they? They

probably picked someone over spring break, in case it was an “on year”…

…Probably.

I wonder if it was Misaki.

You think so, too?

Her last name is Misaki and everything! And I heard her family lives in the town of Misaki.

I know. It’s this creepy doll museum place.

She’s so weird, isn’t she?

I don’t think she has that many friends, either.

Whenever I try talking to her, she’s all cold, or like, distant…

She always has that eye patch on, right? Her left eye is fake, that’s why. It’s blue.

Wo-o-ow, really?

I don’t know how to deal with people like that.

Me either.

Me either, really…

* * *

Did you hear about the transfer student?

Yeah. They said he’s coming next week?

It’s already the second half of April. What a weird time to

transfer.

Definitely…And I think it's going to be a problem.

A problem?

Don't you think this could be dangerous?

Huh?

Come on, about **the thing**.

Wha…No way.

The transfer student coming here means that starting next week, the number of people in the class is going to go up and we're going to be short one desk. Which means…

You mean **this year is actually an "on year"**?

People are saying that it could be…

Hold on a sec. When the transfer student gets here, the number's going up, right? So that means we didn't have anyone extra at the very beginning of April…

That's true, but it could be **a different pattern than it's ever been before**, too, don't you think?

Hm-m-m. Why would they go and put the kid in Class 3 anyway?

The school must have had a reason to do it.

Seriously, though…

After all, it isn't a publicly recognized issue. I heard the principal hardly even knows about it.

Hm-m-m.

Besides that…I heard the kid's name is Sakakibara.

Whoa. That's not a very promising name. But that's not enough reason to say…

But the guy is actually…

* * *

I heard Kazami and Sakuragi went to the hospital yesterday.

To visit Sakakibara?

Yup. To visit him and do some recon.

What happened?

Apparently he came here for some family reason, but **he said this is the first time he's ever lived in Yomiyama**.

So then…

He hasn't even stayed here very long before.

Well, then…

So at least **it probably isn't him, they said**.

You mean **he's not "the casualty"**?

That's right. **Kazami shook his hand, just to make sure.**

He shook his hand? I forget, does that mean something?

Apparently there's some story that **if you shake the hand of "the casualty" when you first meet them, you'll know**. Their hand's

supposed to be freakishly cold.

Are you sure that's true?

He said Sakakibara's hand wasn't cold.

Hmph. So then…what does that mean?

It's someone besides him.

Oh…Figures.

Maybe someone besides him is the extra. We have to consider that possibility, he said.

The tactical officers are working on it?

Looks like we're going to talk it over, everyone together. That's probably when we'll…

Argh. I have no idea how much of this to believe, for real.

It's like that for everyone. I know I feel like that…But if it really does start, things will get bad.

Yeah…

Someone's going to die, every single month. And that's not gonna be a problem we can shrug off on someone else.

…You're right.

Yeah. So we're gonna…

* * *

The transfer student, Koichi Sakakibara, will be coming to school next week, starting on June 6.

Considering that he's transferring in, couldn't that mean **it's starting a month late—that it's on the verge of starting** this year? It's unprecedented, but for now, that interpretation is reasonable… No, it's safer. That's what I think.

But given that this is an anomalous situation, this year might actually be an "off year." Although it would be difficult to undo the damage on the off chance that it's not, so…

…

…As was mentioned earlier, it seems there was a major inadequacy in the "countermeasures" of two years ago. Accordingly, a total of seven students in Class 3 and their family members passed away.

…

…

…Are we agreed then, everyone?

As decided earlier, **when May begins, we must behave as if Misaki is not present in our class**. Diligence is required at all times between arriving at school and leaving campus, at the least. Understood?

Um, sir?

Yes, Sakuragi?

Are the other teachers aware of this, besides yourself and Ms. Mikami?

I expect their fullest possible cooperation. However, there is to be

absolutely no discussion of this matter with teachers other than ourselves.

Not only teachers. You mustn't speak about it to anyone outside of class.

Indeed. I would ask everyone **to refrain from mentioning this to others** as much as possible. **We're told that the result of breaking this rule is to invite undue calamity. In a manner of speaking, this is a "confidential decision," a secret that must be concealed exclusively within third-year Class 3.** It cannot be revealed without good reason.

Sir?

Yes, Yonemura?

Does that include our families, too? We can't even tell our parents and siblings?

The rule is that you must not speak of it.

But…

Do I make myself clear? The school as a public educational institute will never openly acknowledge that, predicated on the existence of something as unrealistic as a "curse," **this sort of illogical "countermeasure" was employed to prevent it**. Despite the fact that many deaths have in fact occurred in the past. That is why **this system has been passed on for many long years in the form of a covert tradition of this group**. The secret must be protected from all those outside the group. All right?

…

…

…

Misaki. In some sense, from your perspective, this discussion has taken an extremely unreasonable turn. You're likely to have a very difficult time, but…is that all right?

…

Will you cooperate?

If I were to say no right now, would that stop you?

Well…of course, we cannot force you. You have the right to refuse. However, if we have no "countermeasure" in place and the "disasters" begin for this year…

Yes…I know. I understand.

You will cooperate?

…Yes.

In that case, everyone, beginning in May, I want everyone to do their best to fulfill this as a decision of the class. So that we can overcome our shared difficulties and all graduate together in good health next March…

* * *

Don't you think that's dangerous? The way Sakakibara's acting?

Yeah, I do.

I thought the teachers would have explained it to him before he got here.

You would think so, but they're the teachers. Maybe they thought the students would handle it amongst themselves…

And Akazawa hasn't been at school. Is she sick? If she were here, she would've taken care of it, no problem.

Maybe so.

You gotta try harder. You're a tactical officer, too, aren't you?

But I never thought he would do that so soon…

Whatever the plan was, he's already talked to her a bunch. And she's not supposed to be there. That blows it, no?

We shouldn't have danced around it and just brought it up sooner.

You're telling me. You and Sakuragi should've explained things to him when you saw him at the hospital or something.

No, that day wasn't…The atmosphere wasn't right to just launch into a conversation like that.

Then why not do it now?

Hold on. That's…

What is it?

Look, if we want to explain the situation to him now, **the only way to do it is if we acknowledge that she's there**…And wouldn't that be bad?

Hm-m-m.

I think it would be pretty bad, personally.

Wouldn't it be okay if we told him outside school?

Maybe…But what if that blows it, too?

If you start to question everything, we're not gonna be able to do anything.

Still, we need to bring Sakakibara into line. **Do something so he quits interacting with her, otherwise…**

I'll try, I guess.

How?

…I'll think about it.

We can't really rely on that.

But don't forget. **He went against the "decision," so if no one dies in May, then that would solve the problem.** We're asking all these questions, but if this year wound up being an "off year" after all, we'd be out of the woods.

Yeah.

I feel like maybe it'll be all right.

That would be nice.

But I guess until then, we've got to get him to behave. Let's just hope this month ends without anything happening.

For real.

Chapter 9

June IV

1

That day, I got back to my grandparents' house in Koike after nine o'clock at night.

Dinnertime was long past.

I'd called on my cell phone to tell them I'd be back late, but I hadn't gotten through; so my grandmother's worry had swelled almost to panic, and I got the feeling that if I'd gotten home even ten minutes later, she would have called the police. She lectured me soundly, but the laudable act of a grandchild saying "I'm sorry, Grandma" calmed her more than I would have expected.

"Where were you lollygagging around at this hour?"

I had thoroughly anticipated the question, and I answered in the most innocent tone I could. "I was at a kid's house. I think we're friends now."

That was all I said. Even if she'd asked more, I wasn't planning to tell her.

Reiko had gotten home before me, and I guess it was natural, but she acted pretty concerned about me, too. They looked as if they were about to hit me with some more questions, but in the end I didn't discuss it in detail that night. I just couldn't summon the energy for it.

I finished my meal in silence and hurried up to the second floor,

where I lay down on the futon spread out in my study room/bedroom.

Physically, I was exhausted; but in contrast, my mind was totally sharp. I rested an arm across my forehead and forced my eyes closed. Then, almost automatically, the conversation I'd had with Mei Misaki only hours earlier began to replay in my mind…

2

One person in the class is treated as if they're "not there." Doing that balances the books and the "disasters" for that year brought about by the "extra person,"—that is,, "the casualty" who's snuck into the class—are prevented. At the least, they can be weakened. That was the "talisman" that had been suggested, executed, and proven effective for the last ten years.

At first, they had thought this year **nothing would happen**, but when they realized that a transfer student—me—was coming after the start of the new semester and they would have "one extra person," the anxiety that this year might take an irregular course spread through the class…And as a result, Mei Misaki was forced to assume the role of the one who's "not there." Starting in May, one month later than usual. And then…

The storyline had entered my mind step-by-step, but I just couldn't accept it as anything real. Even after Mei had finished explaining the broad overview, I still couldn't completely shake my bewilderment.

When I went there, I hadn't intended to doubt what she told me. Not in the slightest. But…even so, I felt some resistance to completely letting go and believing everything she said.

"That's why you should have been let in on it the very first day you came to school, Sakakibara. You should have gone along with everyone else and treated me as if I was 'not there.' Because otherwise the **talisman** weakens. But then at lunch that day, you just came up and started talking to me."

When Mei mentioned it, I recalled again the scene on that day.

H-hey! Sakakibara!

What are you doing, Sakakibara?

The dismayed sound of Teshigawara's and Kazami's voices. As they watched me hurry over to where Mei sat on the bench in the shade of the trees, the two had thought: "Uh-oh."

No question, they'd thought "Uh-oh" and had panicked because they had to stop me from what I was doing. But then, it had been so sudden that there was nothing they could have done…

Why?

Mei had asked me that then.

Are you sure about this?

And that.

It was only now that I felt I understood what she'd meant, and what the things she'd said next meant.

You should be careful.

You…should be careful. It might have started already.

"If it was such an important 'decision,' why didn't anyone tell me about it sooner?"

I'd said it half to myself, but Mei replied, "They probably couldn't find the right moment. Maybe they thought it was hard to bring up for some reason. I already mentioned this, but I don't think anyone had thought about it that deeply."

"It's because I ran into you in the hospital before any of it had even happened…So I was surprised when I saw you in the classroom. That's why I just went up to you that day. Nobody knew I'd seen you before, so they probably couldn't have anticipated that I would reach out to you that fast."

"…Yeah."

"And after that, I ended up being the only one in class who kept on interacting with you, never knowing what was going on. And that stirred up everyone's anxiety a little bit more every time…"

"That's what it was."

This also explained Yukari Sakuragi's odd reaction during gym that day. In fact, hadn't she been obsessing over whether or not I had heard "something" from Teshigawara and Kazami?

Teshigawara had, in fact, probably tried to tell me "something" during lunch. Yes, I'd spotted Mei right as he was bringing it up by telling me "There's actually something we—" after the three of us had gone toward Building Zero, talking about nothing in

particular…

…And then.

After art class the next day.

I've been meaning talk to you about this since yesterday…

Teshigawara had said that to me, but Mochizuki, who'd been with us, had stopped him.

I don't think you can do that anymore.

I felt as if I even understood the nuance behind him saying "anymore" now.

I had already had contact with Mei, so talking to me in a way that might inadvertently acknowledge that "a student named Mei Misaki exists" wouldn't be all right *anymore*. That was the sort of apprehension Mochizuki must have felt then.

And then their reaction when I'd gone into the secondary library, where Mei was, right after that.

H-hey, Sakaki. You're not really…

S-Sakakibara? What are you…?

And it wasn't just them.

At the root of the conflict/dismay that the class as a whole had shown in all kinds of cases ever since I'd transferred here, there must have been constant anxiety and, after all, fear and dread. Not toward Mei Misaki. Toward the "disasters" for this year that might start because I was interacting with her.

3

“I got a call from Teshigawara on my cell phone out of nowhere, trying to warn me. He told me ‘Quit paying attention to **things that aren’t there.** It’s dangerous.’”

It had been the week before the midterm exams. When I had run up to the roof of Building C looking for Mei.

“I guess from his point of view, he was making a decisive move to stop me from messing with the **talisman** anymore.”

“Probably.”

Mei gave a small nod.

“He told me something else that day, too. He said he’d tell me about what happened twenty-six years ago once June started. But then even after June started, he never told me a word. He said things had changed.”

“That was because Sakuragi had died.”

“…But why?”

“You interacted with me and violated the ‘decision’ they’d gone to so much trouble to uphold. I don’t think they could help being nervous that the **talisman** wasn’t going to work anymore. But what if nothing had happened in May, despite what you’d done?”

“You mean…if no one had died?”

“Right. If that had happened, that would mean this year was an ‘off year’ after all. So there wouldn’t be any need to keep **the talisman** going…That’s why.”

“…I see.”

If that had happened, then there wouldn’t have been any need to keep things so unnaturally concealed from me anymore. They’d be able to relax and explain the situation. And they’d be able to dump the weird “strategy” of treating one of their classmates as if they were not there…Speaking of which.

“So then when Sakuragi and her mother died like that, that forecast bombed? It made it obvious that this year is an ‘on year’ and that the ‘disasters’ had already started, so…”

So Teshigawara had told me “Things are different now than they were when I said that.”

…Putting everything together like this, the alienness and doubts that had dug at my heart were clearing bit by bit, but…

“Can I ask you something?”

It was a vague issue that had been nagging at me ever since I first talked to Mei at school.

“It’s your name tag.”

“…Huh?”

“It looks so dirty and tattered. Why is it like that?”

“Oh…Did I look like a ghost wearing an old name tag?”

Her cheeks softened slightly at the joke.

"I had an unfortunate accident," Mei replied. "I dropped my name tag in the laundry and didn't notice, so it got washed. It's a pain to get a new one, so…"

Urk. That's all it had been?

Collecting myself, I went on to ask one more question. "What about how your desk is the only one in the class that's old? Is there a reason for that?"

"Oh, that," Mei answered with a serious look this time. "That's part of **the custom**. The student who's 'not there' gets assigned a desk like that. There are still old desks and chairs in the classrooms that we don't use anymore on the second floor of Building Zero. They brought it over from there. Maybe it has some kind of meaning as part of making the **talisman** work."

"I see. Y'know, I looked at the scratches on that desk."

"You what?"

"The one that says 'who is "the casualty"?' You wrote that, didn't you?"

"…I did." Mei lowered her eyes and nodded. "I know that I'm not 'the casualty.' So then who in our class could it be this year? That's what it means."

"Ah. Oh, but—"

It was then that a kind of mean question slithered into my mind. I voiced it thoughtlessly.

“So *you* can be sure that you’re not ‘the casualty,’ huh?”

Mei didn’t answer.

“Before, didn’t you say that the ‘memory modification’ affected even ‘the casualty’ themselves? So then how could anyone be sure it’s not them?”

At a loss for words, Mei shut her mouth and blinked her right eye to hide her discomfort. I do believe that was the first time I’d ever seen her react like that.

“I’m telling you…”

When at last she began to speak, Mei shut her mouth once again.

It was then that the door to the room opened. Mei’s mother entered. The doll maker of “Studio M,” Kirika.

4

She must have been working in the studio on the second floor until that very moment. Kirika’s wardrobe had a rough look. She wore black jeans with a black shirt just like Mei, and a marigold-colored bandanna over her hair.

She was tall for a woman, and since she wasn’t wearing any makeup, the fundamental attractiveness of her features was easy to see. She had a certain resemblance to Mei, certainly, but she seemed to be cloaked in an air far colder than Mei’s; I can’t say why. When we’d spoken on the phone, the whisper of uneasiness I’d detected in

her responses had projected a different image.

At first, she looked at me as if she'd beheld some mythical beast.

"This is my friend Sakakibara. He's the one who called."

When Mei introduced me, her mother let out an "Oh," and her expression changed. She had been doll-like and expressionless up to that point, but then pretty much in the space of a second, an unnaturally broad smile came over her face.

"Welcome to our home! I'm sorry you have to see me like this." As she spoke, she pulled the bandanna off her head. "This is a rare sight, my daughter bringing a friend over. It's Sakakibara, right?"

"Uh, yes."

"She never tells me how school's going. Are you a friend from class? Or maybe the art club?"

Art club? Was Mei in the art club? So then she and Mochizuki had been…

"Sakakibara is also a visitor at the gallery downstairs. He happened across it and came in, and I guess he really liked it. We've been talking about dolls all day."

Mei spoke to her own mother in a stilted way. It sounded completely routine, not as though it was something special she was doing for this moment.

"You don't say!" Kirika's smile became even more buddy-buddy. "That's unusual for a boy. Have you always liked dolls?"

"Yeah, I guess," I replied, feeling beyond tense. "Oh, but, uh, this

was the first time I'd ever seen dolls like you have here up close… So, um, I was really surprised."

"Surprised?"

"Uh, I mean, I don't really know how to explain…"

In the overly air-conditioned room, in a complete reversal from earlier, sweat was threatening to break out all over my body.

"Um, the dolls here—did you make them in the studio on the second floor, Kirika? I mean, ma'am?"

"That's right, I did. Which of the little darlings did you like best?"

When she asked me that, the first thing that came to mind was the doll of the little girl in the coffin, resting in the back of the basement display room, but…

"Oh, um…"

I was far too self-conscious to just up and tell her that, and I let my voice fade away. It probably would have seemed pretty comical to a bystander.

"You should get home soon, Sakakibara," Mei cut in then, thankfully.

"Oh…yeah."

"I'll walk him part of the way," she informed her mother, then got up from the sofa. "Sakakibara just moved here from Tokyo in April. He doesn't know his way around yet."

“Did you really?”

The smile that had been there a moment before vanished from Kirika’s face. It was the same doll-like expressionlessness she’d worn when she came into the room. Still, her voice retained its friendly silkiness.

“You come over whenever you like.”

5

I walked side by side with Mei down the darkened streets, where night had fallen completely. Mei was on the left and I was on the right. That way, the eye that wasn’t a “doll’s eye” could see me easily.

A warm, wet wind was blowing, bringing the promise of the rainy season. It was sodden with humidity and should have felt clinging. But right now I found it strangely pleasant.

“Is it always like that?” I asked, breaking the silence that had drawn on into an awkward tension.

Mei returned the question curtly. “What?”

“How you are with your mom. You talk so politely to her…like how you would talk to a stranger.”

“Is that weird?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it weird, but I guess I was just wondering if that’s how mothers and daughters talk to each other.”

“I think it’s usually different.” Her reaction was incredibly dry. “That woman and I have always been like that. What’s it like in your family? How does a mother talk to her son?”

“My family doesn’t have a mother.”

All I knew of how mothers are supposed to behave with their children, therefore, was information I’d gathered from the outside.

“What? I didn’t know that.”

“She died right after I was born. So it’s always been just me and my dad…And my dad had to go abroad for a year this spring, so all of a sudden I had to come here. I’m freeloading with my mom’s family in Koike. So all of a sudden, my family’s twice as big.”

“…I see.”

Mei walked several paces with her mouth shut, and then said, “My mother and I can’t help it. I’m one of her dolls, see. Exactly the same as the little darlings in the gallery.”

She didn’t sound obviously sad or despondent or anything like that. Her tone was detached, like always. Still, I was a little taken aback and the word “No…” escaped my lips.

“That can’t be…You’re her daughter, and you’re alive.”

She was nothing like a doll. Before I could tell her that, Mei replied, “I’m alive, but I’m not the real thing.”

Naturally, I couldn’t help being flummoxed by that.

Not the real thing? Meaning—

What? I wanted to ask, but the words stuck in my throat and I swallowed them, hard. Because it seemed wrong to trespass that far. So I nudged the conversation back to "our problem" a little.

"Does your mom know about that stuff we talked about today? About what's been going on in class since May?"

"Not a thing," Mei replied promptly. "We're not allowed to tell our families, anyway. Even if we could, I don't think I could talk about it."

"Would your mom be mad if she found out? About the crazy thing the class is doing to you?"

"I'm not sure. It might bother her a little. But she's not the kind of person who'd get mad and complain to the school, either."

"What about how you're out of school so much? You didn't come today, either…You were at home, weren't you? She doesn't say anything to you about that?"

"You can chalk that up to her being the hands-off type. Maybe it's more indifference than just hands-off. She's shut away in her studio basically all afternoon, anyway. It's like she forgets about everything else when she's got a doll or a painting in front of her."

"So she's not worried, then." I stole a glance at Mei's face, in profile beside me. "Not even right now…"

"Now? Why now?"

"What I'm saying is, you're walking home the first boy who's ever come over to your house, and it's dark already, so…like that."

“I dunno. That stuff doesn’t really bother her, either. She’s told me before ‘That’s because I trust you,’ but I don’t know if that’s true. It could just be **that’s what she wants to believe**.”

She stole a glance back at me, then, but she quickly turned her eye ahead again and went on, “Just…aside from *one thing*.”

“One thing?”

…I wonder what.

I looked at Mei’s face in profile again. She nodded, “Yup,” then blinked slowly, as if to say she didn’t want to talk about it, and suddenly sped up her stride.

I called out pretty loudly, “Hey, Misaki!” trying to stop her. “Now that I’ve heard your explanation, I feel like I have a pretty good idea about ‘the secret of third-year Class 3,’ but…are you okay with that?”

“What are you talking about?”

Again, her question came back harshly.

“I mean, how you have to act, for this **talisman**…”

“Nothing I can do about it.”

This time, Mei’s pace slowed suddenly.

“Someone has to be the one who’s ‘not there,’ after all. It just happened to be me.”

Her tone was just the same as always, but somehow I found her words hard to accept. She said “there’s nothing I can do about it,”

but it didn't seem as though she had very strong feelings about "doing it for everyone's benefit," for instance. I also didn't get the impression "self-sacrifice" or "devotion" really jibed with her behavior…

"You mean you'd have been fine with whatever?" I tried. "Like, you were never very attached to hanging out with the kids in class or to your connection with them?"

Was that why she could be so detached even when she alone out of the class was being treated as if she didn't exist?

"Connections with people and connecting with people…It's true, I'm not very good at that stuff."

After she said that, Mei was silent for the briefest of moments.

"How should I put it? I kind of wonder whether these **things** that everyone seems to want are so important. They seem a little unsettling sometimes…Ah, but maybe the bigger issue in this case is that—"

"What?"

"Suppose they hadn't picked me to be 'not there' and they'd picked someone else instead. Then I would have had to stand next to everyone and go along with them and treat that kid like they didn't exist. Isn't it way better to be cast out by everyone than having to do that? Don't you think?"

"Hm-m-m…"

I could only give her an ambiguous nod. Mei moved suddenly away from me. I hurried after her and saw that ahead on the left,

beside the road, there was a small playground. Mei was heading into it all alone, her feet seeming to glide beneath her.

6

There was a tiny sandy area in a corner of the empty park, and beside it stood two iron bars at different heights. Mei grabbed onto the taller of these—though higher, it was still a low bar meant for children—and lightly flipped herself over it, then rotated and landed solidly on the ground. In the dusky light of the streetlamp, the silhouette of her black shirt and black jeans seemed to flutter and dance.

Struck momentarily dumb, I chased after Mei, into the park.

Leaning back on the bar and arching her back, she let out an "Ah-h-h." It was a fed-up sigh unlike anything I'd heard from her up till now. That's how it sounded.

I walked up to the other bar without a word, and matched Mei's pose. She seemed to have been waiting for that.

"By the way, Sakakibara—"

The gaze of her right eye, unobscured by her eye patch, arrested me.

"There's still something important we haven't talked about."

"Yeah?"

"Come on. How you've become the same as me now."

“Oh…”

Right. There was that.

The things that had happened at school today, that had given me a personal experience of **the decision** that the class had enacted on Mei. From my perspective, of course, it was a huge issue.

“You can probably pretty much imagine why they did it.”

Even so…

Not to sound craven, but I could honestly say that I hadn’t gotten my thoughts that far ordered yet. Maybe she guessed that, because Mei started to tell a story, her attitude like someone lecturing a thickheaded student.

“Mizuno’s sister died and Takabayashi died, so there are already two ‘deaths of June.’ So there’s no more doubting that this is an ‘on year.’ I’m sure everyone came to the natural conclusion that the **talisman** wasn’t working because you talked to me. Even the people who only half-believed it before couldn’t half-believe it anymore.”

I couldn’t answer.

“So then, what should they do? If they let it go on, the ‘disasters’ might keep on coming. More people would die. They say that once it starts, it won’t stop. But there must be some way to stop it. Even if it can’t be stopped, maybe there’s a way the ‘disasters’ can be weakened. That’s how people normally think.”

I spread both my arms out to grip the bar I was leaning back against. My palms were pretty sweaty and they slipped against the metal. Mei went on talking.

“They probably considered two strategies there.”

“Two?”

“Yeah. One would be to pull you into line now, at least, and do everything they could to keep treating me like I’m ‘not there.’ But that might be *too weak*. Even if it had some effect, you could hardly call it a decisive blow.”

I see—at last, I was getting the idea.

The moment Ms. Mizuno’s death had become known, the kind of discussion Mei was talking about had been held. That had been last Thursday. After I’d been released by the detectives from the Yomiyama P.D., I’d gone back to the classroom, but there’d been no one there. It was the period for our extended homeroom. In order to have the discussion without my finding out, they’d gone to a conference room in Building S, like Mochizuki had told me.

“Then the other of the two methods was…”

When I said that, Mei nodded quietly and picked up where I’d left off. **“Raise the number of people who are ‘not there’ to two.”**

“…Huh.”

“They figured that by doing that, maybe they’d be able to strengthen the effect of the **talisman**. As for who suggested it… Maybe it was the tactical officer, Akazawa. From the very beginning, she’s seemed like—how should I put it?—a hard-liner about this issue.”

I could believe that Izumi Akazawa’s being chosen as the new

class representative for the girls that day might have had an effect on other developments in the class.

"At any rate, they talked about the 'strategy' going forward and decided **to do that**. And then today, you became the same as me."

That gathering this morning had been held to confirm the "additional countermeasures" they were going to carry out starting today, and it had been held in secret from me. When he'd gotten news of Ikuo Takabayashi's death over the weekend—

"But look."

Even so, I still couldn't completely accept it.

"That kind of thing…There's no guarantee it'll have any effect. And yet they'd go that far anyway?"

"I told you, everyone is desperate."

Mei's words were forceful.

"In May and June, four people *actually died*. If things go on like that, they could be next, or their parents or siblings. If you think about it in concrete terms, it's not so crazy."

"Yeah…"

…That was true.

If you supposed that every month a "sacrifice" would be taken at random from the people related to third-year Class 3, it could even be Mei next, or me. It could be Kirika—Mei's mother, whom I'd just met—or it could be my grandparents. It didn't seem possible, but could it even get my dad, away in India? I could picture it in my

mind, but I still just didn't have the sense of immediacy that Mei was talking about.

"Do you think it's illogical?" she asked me.

Instantly, I replied, "Yeah, I do."

"How about if you think about it like this?"

Mei leaned her back away from the bar and turned to face me. Without so much as holding down her hair as the wind scattered it, she said, "There may not be any guarantee…But if there's even the slightest chance that this strategy will put a stop to the 'disasters,' isn't that good enough? I always thought so, and that's why I agreed to be the one who's 'not there.'"

I couldn't say anything.

"It's not like there's anyone in the class who's my 'best friend,' as everyone likes to call them. What Mr. Kubodera said about 'needing to overcome the suffering together' and 'graduating as a class' feels totally creepy and totally fake, it's true…But it's sad when people die. Even if I won't feel the sadness directly, there are plenty of other people who will."

Incapable of responding, I fixed my eyes on the movement of Mei's lips.

"We don't know yet if these 'additional countermeasures' will be effective. But if the two of us stop existing, maybe that'll put a stop to any further calamities. Maybe nobody will have to be sad because someone died. If there's even a whisper of a chance that's true, I think it's all right."

As I listened to Mei talk, the words Mochizuki had spoken to me on Saturday came to mind.

Just tell yourself that it's for everyone's benefit. Please.

But I couldn't care less about pretty ideals like that. Even the way Mei was explaining it now, the phrase "for everyone's benefit" carried still another nuance. I could sense that, and plus—

If I were to roll over now and accept that I would be treated as if I were "not there"…

If I did that, how would that affect our—my and Mei's—relationship, I wondered.

We'd be able to interact without having to worry about what anyone else thought, as the two fellow "non-existers" in the class.

At any rate, we would have to be completely "nonexistent" to everyone. Which meant, from our perspective, that everyone else in the class besides us would become "not there"…

And right then, I thought maybe that would be okay, too.

It came alongside a faint bewilderment, a faint regret, and a faint fidgetiness whose true shape not even I could really grasp.

We left the park and went up the road along the levee on the Yomiyama River, the round moon in the night sky tingeing the spaces between the clouds…Finally, at the foot of the bridge that crossed the river, we parted ways.

"Thanks. Take care going home," I told her. "If you believe the stuff you told me today, you're just as close to 'death' as Sakuragi

and Ms. Mizuno were. So…"

"You're the one who needs to be careful, Sakakibara," she answered unflappably, then stroked the tip of her right middle finger diagonally across the eye patch that covered her left eye. "I'll be fine."

How could she say that with such certainty? Something about it seemed odd, and I narrowed my eyes. As I did so, Mei dropped her hand from her eye patch and reached it out to me.

"I look forward to not existing with you tomorrow. Sa. Ka. Ki. Ba. Ra."

She shook my hand lightly. Her hand felt surprisingly cold…But my own body felt a growing heat, as if fired up by the sensation.

She spun around and walked off down the street we'd come by. I could only see her from the back so I can't say for certain, but I thought I saw her hands pull the eye patch from her left eye then.

7

I had at some point sunk into sleep, but I was jerked out of it.

The cell phone I had tossed to one side of my bed was vibrating, flashing a tiny green light. Who could that be? It was pretty late at night. Could Teshigawara want something? Or maybe…

I sprawled on my stomach and stretched a hand out for the phone.

"Heya."

At the very first word, I knew who my caller was. I absently muttered "What do you want?" which he heard.

"Now, now, I shouldn't need a reason!"

My father, Yosuke, was calling from his scorching foreign land. It had been a long time since he'd last called, I thought, but what timing…

"I bet India is hot. Is it night there?"

"I just had curry for dinner. How are you doing?"

"Physically, I'm fine."

My father probably didn't know yet about the string of deaths among my classmates and their families. I probably ought to tell him. But then I'd have to mention the things I'd heard from Mei today, too, and…

After some thought, I decided not to.

Even if I told him a simplified version, it probably wouldn't come across very well, and if I wanted to give him the full explanation, that would take too much time. And besides, supposedly there was that rule that "you can't even tell your family."

Then maybe you're not actually supposed to know.

The last time I'd run into Mei in the basement display room of "Twilight of Yomi," she'd told me something similar.

If you found out, then maybe…

What had she meant by that?

That if “I never found out about it,” the “risk of death” was ever so slightly lower or something? That was something to consider, too.

I decided to avoid any very complex topics on this international phone call and tried approaching my father from a different angle.

“Hey, this might sound strange.”

“What’s that? You in love?”

“Cut it out. It’s nothing that stupid.”

“Oho. So sorry.”

“Did Mom ever tell you any memories she had from middle school?”

“Say what?”

I got the impression that my dad was pretty gobsmacked on the other end of the call.

“Why’re you asking that again, out of the blue?”

“Mom went to the same middle school I’m going to here. North Yomi Middle School. Do the words ‘third-year Class 3’ mean anything to you?”

“Uh-h-h…” My dad mumbled frowningly, then was silent for several seconds. However, the answer he gave me after all that came down to one word: “Nope.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Well, I mean, she probably did tell me stories about middle school, but then if you’re asking me to retell them now…Was

Ritsuko in third-year Class 3, then?"

Hm-m-m…I guess this was the memory power of a man over fifty.

"By the way, Koichi."

This time my dad asked me the question.

"It's two months you've been there now, so how does Yomiyama seem, a year and a half later? Not much different?"

"Mrrm…" I cocked my head, the phone still pressed to my ear. "A year and a half later? But this is the first time I've been here since starting middle school."

"Eh? That doesn't seem right…"

There was a *kksh* of interference and my father's voice crackled.

I held the phone away from my ear for a second. *Oh right*, I recalled, *this room's got terrible reception.* I checked the bars on the edge of the screen. There was just barely one bar, but the interference was getting worse and worse. *Ksshkksh, kkkshkshkkssh…*

"…Hm-m?"

I made out my father's voice through the snapping interference.

"Oh, right. You're right. I must be remembering wrong about…"

His tone sounded as if he had just then remembered something. But the rest was obscured by interference and grew increasingly unclear. In the end, the call dropped completely.

I gazed down at the zero bars on the LCD screen for a little bit,

then lazily set the phone down beside my pillow.

All at once, *brrr*, a shudder ran through me like a powerful chill. My whole body…no, not just my physical body. The same shudder went through my mind, too.

…I'm scared.

One beat later, the words came.

I'm scared. Terrified. It was these feelings that had made me shudder.

The saga concerning third-year Class 3 that I had heard from Mei Misaki today—it was because of that. It hadn't been so bad as I was listening or for a little while after, but now, all of a sudden…There was a time lag, like the sore muscles that came after exercise.

I felt as if the translucent gauze that had been obscuring the reality of events behind a kind of tenuousness had abruptly disappeared. Laid bare, touched by shades of the utmost reality, terror assaulted me…

Third-year Class 3 is the closest to death.

We've drawn nearer to "death."

If they let it go on, the 'disasters' might keep on coming.

They say that once it starts, it won't stop…

If everything Mei said was true and, on top of that, if the "additional countermeasures" that had begun today weren't effective…

That meant someone else would get dragged to their death.

It could be me—there was that chance, of course. (God, it's a little late for that…)

There were thirty students in third-year Class 3. Twenty-eight, minus Sakuragi and Takabayashi. For convenience's sake, say the targets were limited only to the students in the class. Then there was, simplistically speaking, a one-in-twenty-eight chance that this very night, I could…

The tragedy of Yukari Sakuragi that I had witnessed and Ms. Mizuno's elevator accident that I had heard over the phone as it was happening…They tangled and melted into one another and became a somber, crookedly shaped net spreading over my heart like a spiderweb.

There in the middle of it…

The scratches on Mei's desk in the classroom flitted suddenly, in tight close-up, through my brain.

Who is "the casualty"—?

Thank you for buying this e-book, published by Hachette Digital.

To receive special offers, bonus content, and news about our latest e-books and apps, sign up for our newsletters.

Sign Up

Or visit us at hachettebookgroup.com/newsletters

ANOTHER, Volume 1
YUKITO AYATSUJI

Translation: Karen McGillicuddy

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Another ©Yukito Ayatsuji 2009.
First published in Japan in 2009 by KADOKAWA SHOTEN Co., Ltd., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA SHOTEN Co., Ltd., Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2013 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen Press
Hachette Book Group
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017

www.hachettebookgroup.com
www.YenPress.com

Yen Press is an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Yen Press name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

First eBook edition: March 2013

ISBN: 978-0-316-25275-1

Contents

Title Page
Welcome
Dedication

Part 1: What?……Why?
Introduction
Chapter 1: April
Chapter 2: May I
Chapter 3: May II
Chapter 4: May III
Chapter 5: May IV
Interlude I
Chapter 6: June I
Chapter 7: June II
Chapter 8: June III
Interlude II
Chapter 9: June IV
Newsletters
Copyright